

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

AESTHETICS OF PLAY: NARRATIVE EXPERIENCE AND
THE PRODUCTION OF MEANING IN VIDEO GAMES

by
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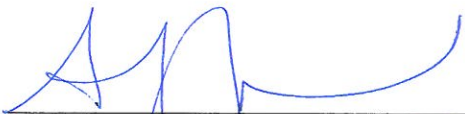
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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This thesis will attempt to place the video game as a contemporary narrative medium within the historical tradition of how institutionally accepted narrative mediums were received by audiences at the time of their conception. This juxtaposition will allow a contextual framework for the critical study of video games to emerge. Narrative theory, reader response theory and modes from experimental drama will be used to provide a theoretical basis for looking at video games. This thesis will attempt to show that rather than being a break from conventionally accepted mediums, the genre of the video game perpetuates those narrative traditions while retaining its own unique formal properties. In contemporary video games, players have agency to create and direct their own stories and direct plot progression outside of a central linear narrative. Narrative is therefore created and shaped by the player's assimilation of ideological and cultural world views to the activity of play and the game world.

In Chapter 1, the medium of the video game will be contextualized in the history of traditional narrative forms, namely theatre, radio drama, film and television. The characteristics for the categorization of narrative role-playing games will be defined and a theoretical framework for analysis will be laid out. Chapter 2 will examine player agency and the scope of choice in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda 2011) and *Fable: The Lost Chapters* (Microsoft Game Studios 2004) in relation to dynamics of interactivity in modern theatre and open-world digital environments. Chapter 3 will explore the ways in which players "fill in" the narrative "gaps" during gameplay in *Skyrim*, the war-themed survival game *This War of Mine* (11 Bit Studios 2014) and sandbox survival game *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011) in an attempt to show how gameplay is synonymous with the act of interpretation, and in some cases creation. Finally, in the concluding chapter, the contributing factors to a player's overall narrative experience of gameplay will be reviewed and avenues for future narrative game research will be considered.

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To Sarah, for all the hours we spent in our own world.

INTRODUCTION

IN WHICH VIDEO GAMES WILL NEVER BE ART

A. Sharp Pens and Short Swords: Art Versus the Video Game

Renowned film critic Roger Ebert could not have anticipated the sheer volume of feedback he would receive when, in response to a question posed by a reader of his online blog, he said that while he was “prepared to believe that video games can be elegant, subtle, sophisticated, challenging and visually wonderful,” he found that “the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art” (“Why Did the Chicken Cross the Genders?” 2005). Many of Ebert's fans, video game enthusiasts, and professionals in the video game industry rose to the challenge of swaying his opinion. Some readers cited examples of games they considered to be art. Others, believing that Ebert was misinformed due to his lack of first-hand experience with the medium, recommended specific games for Ebert to play. It was also suggested that Ebert watch "An Argument for Game Artistry" (2009), an online video of a TEDxUSC talk given by game designer Kellee Santiago. Ebert did not play any of the games suggested to him. He did, however, watch the video, which he responded to in an April 2010 blog entry titled, "Video Games Can Never Be Art."

Ebert's playfully sardonic critique of Santiago's talk is not as misguided as is his knowledge of video games, which is limited to *Cosmology of Kyoto* (Yano Electric 1993-5), an exploratory adventure game that Ebert seems to have greatly enjoyed playing,¹ and *Myst* (Brøderbund 1993), a graphic² adventure game for which Ebert

¹ In 1994, Ebert reviewed *Cosmology* for *Wired* magazine. It is the only video game review he is known to have written. “The richness is almost overwhelming; there is the sense that the resources of this game are limitless and that no two players would have the same experience. I have been exploring the ancient

“lacked the patience” (“Okay, Kids, Play On My Lawn” 2010). Despite Santiago’s later claim in an online op-ed that her talk was an attempt to move away from the debate of the video game versus art because, in her view, they already *are* art (“My Response to Roger Bert, Video Game Skeptic” 2010), she nevertheless spends a great portion of her TEDx talk defending that very position. First, she attempts to lay down a definition for art, which she borrows from *Wikipedia*: “Art is the process of deliberately arranging elements in a way that appeals to the senses or emotions” (“Game Artistry”). Ebert is skeptical about this definition, which he argues could correspond to his personal feelings about a game of chess. Ebert is equally unsuccessful in his attempt to define art and concedes that “yes, it is a matter of taste” (“Art?”).³ Next, Santiago attempts to show that art, and what constitutes art, evolves throughout history, but in her reference to prehistoric cave paintings as “chicken scratches” in comparison to the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Santiago certainly ignores the cultural and historical implications behind the creation of those ancient paintings. Her second attempt to make the point of evolution shows that, while Ebert may have been misinformed about video games, she is equally misinformed. Santiago claims that speech, first used for warning, and writing, first used for bookkeeping, later evolved, respectively, into song and storytelling. In response, Ebert rightly speculates that an oral tradition of storytelling and song as a

city in spare moments for two weeks now, and doubt that I have even begun to scratch the surface. This is the most beguiling computer game I have encountered, a seamless blend of information, adventure, humour, and imagination - the gruesome side-by-side with the divine (“Cosmology of Kyoto”).

² As opposed to earlier, text-based adventure games such as *Zork* (Infocom 1980), *The Hobbit* (Melbourne House 1982), *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (Infocom 1984) and *Amnesia* (Electronic Arts 1986), which required players to type textual commands to interact with the game world.

³ In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979), Pierre Bourdieu attributes artistic judgements of taste to what he terms “cultural capital” (12) or an individual’s capacity to “decode” the meanings “encoded” within a work of art (2). Bourdieu asserts that, “the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds [to] a social hierarchy of consumers.” Therefore “tastes . . . function as markers of ‘class,’” (1-2). Taste is therefore a “classifier,” by which “social subjects . . . distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make” (6). In terms of “high” art and “low” art, the acceptance of one becomes a marker of the refusal of the other with both being in constant competition.

method for preserving cultural history, existed long before writing was developed. Santiago then provides several examples of video games that fit her definition of art and which arguably signify the evolution of the medium as a whole. Another sign that games have "crossed that boundary into artistic expression," Santiago asserts, is the evolution of audience expectations, particularly among grown-up gamers who are demanding titles that offer higher levels of "joy . . . ecstasy . . . sadness . . . catharsis," evident from the high sales figures and critical acclaim of particular video games. In Ebert's view, Santiago's consumer and market-based evidence implies that the only way to experience "joy or ecstasy from her games would be through profit participation."

While Santiago's video games are exquisitely unique – *Flower* (2007), in which the player assumes the role of the wind controlling the flight of a single petal of a flower, for example, her argument for the video game as an art form leaves much to be desired. Santiago admits as much although at the same time, correctly, reminds us that the question of whether video games are art is no longer a topic for serious debate ("My Response to Roger Ebert").⁴ Current inquiry within critical intellectual circles into the video game as a medium has all but abandoned the issue of the medium's status as art in favour of exploring what, if any, intrinsic value the video game has to offer besides the functional value of providing entertainment. Nonetheless, Ebert is certainly correct in his assertion that the video game is a product of the entertainment industry within a

⁴ This debate has been all but settled, even within the video game industry itself. Professor and game designer at New York University's Game Center, for example, defends games "as a valid form of culture on its own that doesn't have to walk in the shadow of 'art'" ("Games, Stay Away from Art. Please" 2014). In November 2012, the Museum of Modern Art in New York announced that it had acquired fourteen games as part of its Architecture and Design collection. In response to the announcement, art critic Jonathan Jones wrote an article titled, "Sorry MoMA, Video Games Are Not Art" (2012), in which he argues that "[t]he player cannot claim to impose a personal vision of life on the game, while the creator of the game has ceded that responsibility. No one "owns" the game, so there is no artist, and therefore no work of art."

capitalistic culture, and a culture of consumption. The attempt to elevate the medium to the status of art, according to Ebert, is seemingly an attempt made by consumers to justify their enjoyment of what is happening on a screen. He concludes that "To my knowledge, no one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers" ("Cross the Genders?"). What Ebert finds problematic about the medium of the video game is all too familiar: the "nature of the medium" of the video game lies in the origins of an object that is mass produced for mass consumption – "craftsmanship" that is created to be mindlessly enjoyed, much like the Hollywood blockbuster. The culture of capitalism is certainly pervasive, but even Ebert would have to agree that this does not mean that all films and video games that are produced with the intent to entertain have no aesthetic value.

B. The Fires of Industry: The Age of Mechanical Reproduction

Roger Ebert was certainly not the pioneer of the dialectic between an elite "high" culture and an all-encompassing "low", or popular, culture. Written towards the end of World War II in 1945, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's essay, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (1944), considers the rise of popular culture during the advent of Western capitalism during an epoch of technological advancement. Adorno views popular culture as a destructive force that is produced and distributed on an industrial scale and serves as a tool for economic control by the state apparatus. Conceivably influenced by his disillusionment with the state of society both during Hitler's reign and the post-WWII era, in "The Culture Industry," he

depicts a rather bleak future for Western society in which the public is dominated by a consumerist state. In such a state, true enlightenment of society is inhibited by the bombardment of the public mind with media that serves a capitalistic agenda or, to use Adorno's denomination, the culture industry (95). Aggravated by the onset of jazz culture and the broadcast of classical symphonies through radio sets in private homes, Adorno contends that the culture industry cheapens art by selling it as a commodity, a process by which art becomes "autonomous," or de-ideologized. At first glance it appears contradictory that a dedicated Marxist would hold such a Kantian view of aesthetics. However, according to Andy Hamilton in "Adorno and the Autonomy of Art" (2009), rather than the Romantic vision of "art for art's sake," Adorno's version of autonomous art refers to an art object that is divorced from any social function (252-6), rendering it void of meaning and any political or social implications. What is marketed as art is, therefore, not art at all, but an illusion conjured to deceive the public by those with money and power, or the bourgeois class. The public's consumption of this "fake" art is equivalent to mindless enjoyment. This view makes two assumptions: 1) that members of the public are incapable of independent and individual thought, and 2) the culture industry's commodified, autonomous art form is completely separable from all other art forms.

Whereas Adorno was repulsed by popular culture, Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht were much more forgiving. In his well-known essay, "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), Benjamin argues that what is stripped from the work of art that is reproduced for mass consumption is the aura of the original work (299). The concept of "aura," as Benjamin describes it, is a "unique phenomenon of a distance" (300) or, the almost magical gratification of experiencing a unique object

from a distance. Commodified cultural forms are no longer unique by their very quality of being identically reproducible. For Benjamin, the traditional, unique art object, the statue of Venus for example, does not exist apart from its historic function in ritual,⁵ but so too does the technically reproduced object exist as a product of its time. Only the function has changed. Unlike Adorno, Benjamin does not exclude the validity of the reproducible objects of this “new” popular culture (namely films and photographs) from interpretation. On the contrary, they must be interpreted differently from traditional forms by virtue of their creation *for* technical reproduction and mass reception (300-1).

In addition to warranting new methods for interpretation, new forms have a social function in that, by being accessible to the masses, the attitudes of reception are altered and the question of authenticity is replaced by the question of significance (Benjamin 302). The less socially significant is “uncritically enjoyed,” while the more significant is critically elevated. The matter of significance, then, lies in the hands of the creators. According to Brecht in “The Film, the Novel and Epic Theatre” (1930), a critique of the early film industry and an account of the trial over the artistic copyright of his *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), “creators,” or artists, should make use of a new medium lest they validate the production of “bad work” (Willet 47). In addition, inaction prevents advancement of the medium, which is necessary for new works to be produced. Brecht, however, unlike Adorno and Benjamin, blurs the lines between the old and the new by arguing that they are dependent upon and related to each other because art, even mechanically produced art, has the social responsibility of continually transforming its means of representation. Like Benjamin, Brecht understood that a new

⁵ Benjamin remarks on opposing historical views of the statue of Venus, which was not made for identical reproduction. For the ancient Greeks the statue was an object of reverence, religious figures in the Middle Ages “viewed it as an ominous idol (300).

form, an art object that is created using a new method, necessitates a different method of interpretation. A stage play for example, cannot offer the same view of the world as a film can for the very reason that both are completely different forms that require different tools for production. Furthermore, even within the boundaries of a form, interpretation differs in creation and reception. The producer of a film, he posits, reads stories differently from an individual who is watching it. For Brecht, the view that old, “antitechnical ‘glowing’ art with its religious links” (Benjamin’s statue of Venus) and new, technical and reproducible forms, like film, exist separately from one another is not only limiting but fatalistic (48).

Drawing from Adorno’s work and other Marxist theories of culture and the culture industry, Frederic Jameson further elaborates Brecht’s view of the interrelatedness between high and popular culture (“Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” 1979). For Jameson, the Kantian notion of art as a “finality without an end” (qtd. in Jameson 131), whose creation, while goal-oriented, has no economic or political purpose, holds true for all art objects. Despite the inclusive aesthetics, he does, however, draw the distinction, as Brecht did, between good, or successful, works and inept, meaningless works of both high and mass culture. Jameson opposes the subjective value judgements that demarcate high and low (134) and further undercuts the fatalistic opposition – the valorisation or stigmatization of one over the other as if the existence of either is disassociated from time – by calling for a historical approach to interpretation (133). Placing cultural forms within a historical and social framework reveals that they are interdependent and inseparable from the culture of production (133-4). Cultural critic Raymond Williams expands this holistic approach to culture and its constituents by tracing the evolution of the meaning of the words “industry”,

“democracy”, “class”, “art”, and “culture”, which he concludes began to signify new concepts beginning in the 19th century.

According to Williams in *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958), it was only in the late 19th century, after the Industrial Revolution and as a response to democracy, that “culture” came to mean “a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual” (xiv). This all-encompassing notion of culture is a direct result of the social, economic and political transitions that took place throughout history and incorporates the public and private: 1) culture as a response and an alternative to a new kind of society and 2) culture as a body of personal and private experience which affects the interpretation and creation of art, and thereby, the ways in which meaning is given to, and determined from, those experiences (xv). Andrew Milner takes William’s cultural theory a step further in *Literature, Culture and Society* (1996), and analyses metanarratives that recur across mediums and time periods. Milner examines the institution of higher education and the literary canon as the culmination of value judgments made by the literary elite. He traces the forays of cultural studies into literary studies and provides a methodology for cultural studies that is not a move from elitist “high” to the popular “low,” but an attempt to dissolve that very distinction (58). For Milner “the ‘literary’ is a subsystem of the ‘cultural’,” and therefore the distinguishing characteristics of what is literature and non-literature is a matter “of degree and not of kind.” Following this line of thought in a comparative study among *The Book of Genesis*, *Paradise Lost* (1667), *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* (1994) and *Blade Runner* (1982), Milner links the texts and films by their shared meta-narrative of “the fall of man” and explores how each is informed by a different historical and social context.

C. The Truth of All Stories: Video Games and Narrative Traditions

For Milner, as for Williams, Jameson, and others before them, no cultural form – high or low – is separate from history. Mass production and distribution of literature, film and music is a direct result of technological discovery (the printing press, the camera and the radio respectively) and the advance of capitalist culture. The medium of the video game is no different in this respect. There is certainly no video game equivalent to *Paradise Lost*. In this, Ebert is absolutely right. The video game is a commodity that does require, in Ebert's words, "profit participation." But even Ebert's medium of choice – the movies – requires that same kind of participation. It is this tendency to consider video games as an industrial cultural commodity designed to entertain the masses (Engfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca, *Understanding Videogames* 147) that hinders the exploration of what is, in retrospect, a relatively young medium. Brecht's cautionary advice, that ignoring a new medium's possibilities for "good work" makes "bad work" permissible, holds true for the video game as well. It is a product of the entertainment industry within a contemporary, global culture of capitalism that began with an experiment. As the technology used in video game production becomes more advanced, however, so too does the medium itself. This thesis will attempt to show that narrative in the medium of the video game is informed by narrative traditions of institutionally accepted art forms. Contemporary video games, with their detailed open-worlds and wide scope of player interactivity, have developed into a medium with great potential for telling and inspiring stories that are aesthetically complex.

How can a medium that requires the cooperation of game designers, graphic artists, programmers, sound engineers and writers be compared to the classical work of art that is produced by a single individual? How can computer code compare to

Milonic verse? Simply put, it can't. On one end of the spectrum, there are those who believe that because video games are interactive, the medium is actually a break from traditional narrative forms. As ludologist Gonzalo Frasca fervently argues in "Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology" (Wolf and Bernard, *The Video Game Theory Reader* 2003), "unlike traditional media, video games are not just based on representation but on an alternative semiotical structure known as simulation" (221-2). For ludologists like Frasca, video games are a type of computer software that should be structurally analysed as games and not as narrative. At the other end of the spectrum, there are the proponents of high culture, who are determined to discredit the medium from being anything more than a product of the entertainment industry. This thesis contends that video games are neither merely a system of rules nor are they simply narrative. As Celia Pearce suggests in "Theory Wars: An Argument Against Arguments in the So-Called Ludology/Narratology Debate" (2005), "most games lie in a fuzzy realm between, where narrative has a role to play, albeit often abstract, allegorical or metaphorical." Since the video game requires the existence of an actor for narrative progression (a player is required to play a game), which means that the gamer plays a role on both sides of the theatre's actor and audience divide. In addition to player interaction, however, storytelling in video games also relies on aural and visual components such as sound effects, camera angles, images, animated sequences (also called cut-scenes).⁶ It is hard to ignore then, that the medium *does* share narrative techniques and practices with the theatre, radio drama, and film.

To the knowledge of this writer, the many existing theoretical approaches from both video game studies and narratology have not been used in conjunction with one

⁶ In *Understanding Video Games*, Engfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca define the cut-scene as a "[d]ramatically important sequence, often displayed without the interaction of the player. The scene is typically shown to motivate a shift in the "plot" of the game" (250).

another to analyse video games in a way that is analogous, for example, to those used to analyse literary or cinematic texts. This thesis will, therefore, examine narrative video games by exploring several theoretical approaches developed to analyse narrative forms in various genres alongside the formal aspects of role-playing games in an attempt to show how aesthetic complexity in video games is manifested through gameplay. This thesis will consider any game in which the player assumes the role of a character (or several characters) and in which the player's choices are consequential to narrative development, a role-playing game. In Chapter 1, the medium of the video game will be contextualized in the history of traditional narrative forms, namely theatre, radio drama, film and television. The characteristics for the categorization of narrative role-playing games will be defined and a theoretical framework for analysis will be laid out. Chapter 2 will examine player agency and the scope of choice in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda 2011) and *Fable: The Lost Chapters* (Microsoft Game Studios 2004) in relation to dynamics of interactivity in modern theatre and open-world digital environments. Chapter 3 will explore the ways in which players "fill in" the narrative "gaps" during gameplay in *Skyrim*, the war-themed survival game *This War of Mine* (11 Bit Studios 2014) and sandbox survival game *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011) in an attempt to show how gameplay is synonymous with the act of interpretation, and in some cases creation. Finally, in the concluding chapter, the contributing factors to a player's overall narrative experience of gameplay will be reviewed and avenues for future narrative game research will be considered.

CHAPTER 1 IN WHICH TRADITIONS ARE NOT LOST

A. The Magic Circle: Theatre, Carnival and Game Spaces

The theatre was perhaps one of the earliest cultural forms of public mass communication aside from the fundamental oral traditions of singing and storytelling. In his historical and cultural account of the peculiarities of Renaissance theatre, Michael D. Bristol explores the public space of social and political theatre in Renaissance England and its relationship to the Bakhtinian notion of “carnival” (*Carnival and Theatre* 1985). For Bristol, Renaissance drama, especially in its early stages, offers the representation of alternative modes by which popular culture, specifically the plebeian community, resisted the forces of authority (4). Citing John Stow’s *Survey of London* (1598), Bristol elaborates upon the notion of the public playhouse as the site of a political mise-en-scène, where standardized social hierarchies were abolished. Synonymous with other forms of popular festivity and collective celebration such as the midsummer festivals, the theatre took place “outside any formal administrative apparatus,” and existed as a form by which plebeian traditions and ordinary life were represented and reaffirmed through performance, reception and “appreciation of theatrical spectacle” (5). Bristol examines Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “heteroglossia” as a theory of all human interaction that is realized semiotically – including verbal expression, gestures and physical action, and the organization of space and time, or chronotope – and manifested in a “[c]arnivalized” culture (21-2) that is “unselfconscious” and having “*both* a social and an antisocial tendency” (25).

These two characteristics are certainly contradictory at face value, and, in *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Bakhtin clearly draws a line between the “artistic form”, the spectacle of the theatre and what he means by carnival. For Bakhtin, “carnival” is “not a spectacle seen by people” but rather, it is something that everyone participates in and “does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators” (*Rabelais* 7). Following this definition, “carnival” is a social phenomenon in the sense of creating communal cohesion. It is, however, antisocial in the sense that “hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men . . . certain norms and prohibitions of usual life” (15) are suspended and therefore it is in this “second life” (8) in which the possibilities for “social protest and the displacement of the sacred by partisan economic and political concerns” (Bristol 25) become a reality.

Robert Cunliffe elaborates on this “unselfconsciousness” of the carnivalesque within the theatre, particularly Brecht’s epic theatre and Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, in his essay, “Charmed Snakes and Little Oedipuses: The Architectonics of Carnival and Drama in Bakhtin” (1993), by looking at carnival from the point of view of reception. The carnivalesque is a non-transactional event in the sense that there are no spectators. All those who are present are active participants. By virtue of the active, collective participation in an event, distances between subjects are therefore erased and no contemplation of an incident can occur. Instead, the experience of an event is affective rather than cognitive (Cunliffe 52).⁷ However, Cunliffe argues, Artaud’s revision of traditional dramaturgy calls for the doing “away with stage and auditorium”

⁷ Compare Bakhtin: “In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people” (7).

in favour of a single space in which “[d]irect communication will be established . . . between actors and audience [who are] seated in the centre of the action” (qtd. in Cunliffe 55). In addition, Brecht’s criticism of the traditional role of the theatre goer with “their eyes open” but who “stare rather than see” and “look at the stage as if in a trance” (Brecht, *A Short Organum for the Theatre* 187), echoes Artaud’s call for a more participatory audience. Where Brecht differs from Artaud’s carnivalesque notion of theatre is in his critique of an audience that is totally and mindlessly immersed in the theatrical event. Brecht certainly calls for a dissolution of the fourth wall between the audience and the stage, but at the same time the audience must also be alienated from the events that take place upon that stage (191-2). For Brecht, Bakhtin’s notion of an affect-driven participation bars the audience from critical thought (Cunliffe 59).

While occurrences of audience participation can be located in Renaissance and modern theatre, examples of this phenomenon can increasingly be found in contemporary interactive and immersive theatre. Daniel and Sidney Homan explore the relationship between audience participation within the theatre and the game player within a game space.⁸ In “The Interactive Theater of Video Games: The Gamer as Playwright, Director, and Actor” (2014), the Homans contend that interactive theatre and video games are beginning to overlap (169). The article cites game designer Steve Gaynor of *Gone Home* (2013), a game in which the player-character comes home from college to find her family missing, comparing the player’s occupation and exploration of the game space to the audience member’s participation and exploration in the interactive theatrical production of *Sleep No More* (2011), Punchdrunk’s reimagination of *Macbeth*. The game space of the vacant mansion in *Gone Home* is comparable to the

⁸ Game space, or “gamespace” is “[the] entire space . . . presented by a game” (Engfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca 251), that makes up the fictional game world.

theatrical “stage” of *Sleep No More*, which is situated within an abandoned school building in Manhattan. Audience members wander freely through the space, and are able to interact with objects, communicate and observe characters in the play, and discover secret passages or rooms. These are precisely the kinds of activities the player is expected to perform in *Gone Home* and in contemporary open-world adventure and survival games. The video game, like interactive theatre, is a spectacle that requires an active participant, and while this means it is certainly reliant on visual elements, sound is equally an important factor. In order to better ascertain the connection between the video game and traditional narrative forms, in the sections that follow, public and theoretical reception of the radio drama, film, and television will be explored.

B. The Invisible Medium: Radio Dramas and the Power of Sound

In *Understanding Radio* (1986), Andrew Crissell characterizes radio as a “blind medium” (3), by virtue of the fact that “[w]e cannot see its messages” which “consist only of noise and silence.” Martin Shingler and Cindy Wieringa, however, in *On Air: Methods and Meanings of Radio* (1998), argue that Crissell’s association of the medium with the term “blind,” connotes an “impairment” which suggests that radio’s “lack of visuals” is problematic rather than “a positive attribute” (74). For Shingler and Wieringa, radio is certainly distinguished “from other media by the fact that its form cannot be seen,” (75) and propose instead, the use of the term “invisible,” which is associated with “positive attributes such as power and magic,” to characterize radio. Nevertheless, because the “sounds of radio” are “there to be decoded and translated into sights, sounds, smells, tastes and textures” (76) the medium of radio, while invisible, is also a very visual one. According to Tim Crook’s overview of the form of the radio

drama, *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice* (1999), the first extant play written specifically for the medium of the radio was *A Comedy of Danger* (1924) by Richard Hughes (6). In his comprehensive overview of the narrative medium of radio drama, Crook refers to a first-hand account⁹ of the play's first broadcast, during which the production team encountered technical difficulties in fulfilling the play's requirement for an explosive sound effect. Reporters and critics were gathered in a room with a loud-speaker which was broadcasting the dramatization of Hughes play, but the sound engineers worried that a loud boom would damage their equipment. To solve the problem, a "magnificent" explosion was staged in the room next door – the sound effect later receiving "top marks with the press." For Crook, the theatre is not inherently dependent on spectacle, but rather, appreciation of the medium is reliant on both the act of listening and viewing (8). Crook contends that the unique nature of the radio drama lies in the medium's dual embodiment of a physical, auditory dimension in addition to being a "powerful visual force." The "auditory imagination", according to Crook, is an activity that penetrates "conscious levels of thought and feeling" and "works through meanings ... fuses ... the most ancient and the most civilized mentality" (14).

Crook's notion of the "auditory imagination" is certainly a powerful force when considered alongside an early example of mass hysteria instigated by a radio broadcast. In *Radio's America: The Great Depression and the Rise of Modern Culture* (2007), Bruce Lenthall recounts an adaptation of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* (1897) that was broadcast by the *Mercury Theatre on the Air* in 1938. The production was narrated by Orson Welles, who was introduced by the radio announcer as Professor Richard Pierson at the beginning of the broadcast (Lenthall, 1-2). Over the next hour,

⁹ The original author of this historical account is unknown, and was originally uncovered by Alan Beck in *The Listener* magazine, in 1956 (Crook 6).

“Dr. Pierson” described the annihilation of the world by invading Martians, but even before the broadcast had ended:

Listeners fled, clogged phone lines seeking information, prayed, went into shock, and contemplated suicide rather than die at the Martians’ hands. The crowds that flocked New York City’s streets, said one observer, outdid even the chaotic scene that had accompanied the end of World War I. (2)

Perhaps if the general sentiment had not been one of fear and uncertainty brought about by the Great Depression, those who listened to Welles’ rendition of the events of *War of the Worlds* might not have instigated mass panic. Furthermore, as Lenthall describes it, the introduction of the radio as a new system for mass communication also represented the vision of a modern culture in which “culture and communication might be centralized and standardized” and produced a very real fear in those who valued and found meaning in the personal experiences of the individual (5-6). On the other hand, as Richard J Hand and Mary Traynor assert in *The Radio Drama Handbook: Audio Drama in Context and Practice* (2011), the broadcast of *War of the Worlds* is an exemplary illustration of the formal properties of radio in the way that it exploits “the imagination of the listener” with “a consistent immediacy” through the use of “music, sound effects, silences and hesitations” which are “as important as its blatant screams of hysteria and the story itself” (29-30). While the video game is inherently a visual medium as opposed to the invisible medium of radio, sound nevertheless retains its power within the game space.

According to Michael Nitsche in *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds* (2008), sound is one component of the video game that “has always been a layer for evocative narrative elements” (129). Nitsche identifies three elements of sound that combine to form “one consistent, overall soundscape” (141) of a

game space: speech, sound effects and music. Unlike radio, in which sound is used to shape and heighten the listener's imagination, in video games speech, sound effects and music combine to work as an "acoustic telling of space" (144), forming a soundscape that serves to enhance the player's perception of the game space. "Elaborate soundscapes," as Nitsche asserts, "can build up a dramatic foreshadowing, provide direct acoustic engagement up to the climax, and mark an end with a cathartic aftermath" (142).

For virtual in-game characters that the player does not control, also known as non-player characters (NPCs), speech is a vital factor in the enhancement of a "character's expressive behaviour together with animations, facial expressions, and movements in space" (139). For example, in *The Sims* (Electronic Arts 2000), a life-simulation game, NPCs speak an abstract fictional language that is essentially gibberish and cannot be understood. However, the characters' voices "carry emotional tension" that "allows the game to represent emotional states in the performance of the speech and to disregard the details of what specifically is being spoken." Sound effects on the other hand, emphasize the immediacy of a situation. For Nitsche, sound effects like that of a waterfall, gunshot or car engine allows the video game player to "distinguish objects within space" and also "provides an association with a real physical sound" allowing "for the projection and fast comprehension of the simulated situation" (130). Finally, in video games, music functions to create context and dramatic tension as illustrated by "A Little Night Music," a particular game level of *Clocktower 3* (Capcom 2002):

The game . . . includes a level staged in 1942 London that is thematically centered on the death of a young pianist. Not only is the sound of the piano playing used in the . . . transition phase into this specific level, but players also hear it during navigation through the world . . . In order to proceed in the level, players have to enter the theater and see the pianist playing. . . . The result is a

meaningful and dense soundscape that invites the player's imagination—it asks quite literally who the pianist might be and what her fate is. (136)

Music in video games then, “can connect event to event and events to meaning, and encourage users to understand this meaning within the virtual space,” (138) in much the same way that, as Claudia Gorbman suggests, film music binds “shot to shot, narrative event to meaning, spectator to narrative” (qtd. in Nitsche 138).

C. O Brave New World: The Invention with No Future

While the formal properties of radio were being refined in the early twentieth century, the narrative potential of an experimental medium – born in the late nineteenth century and growing into an incredibly lucrative industry by the 1950s – was also being explored: film. The first commercial example of cinematography is attributed to the efforts of the brothers Louis and August Lumière who combined “the photographic and projection device into one machine [called the Cinématographe] in early 1895” (Dixon and Audrey 6). In fact, it was Louis Lumière who “had famously declared that the Cinématographe was an ‘invention without a future’” (7). Whereas Muybridges clips were only a few seconds long, the short films by the Lumière brothers were roughly a full minute in length – the most notable of these being *L'Arrivée d'un train à La Ciotat* (1895) which depicted a train's arrival to a railroad station. According to Wheeler W. Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey in *A Short History of Film* (2008), the most famous example of a projected motion picture began with a bet in 1878. Eadweard Muybridge, “was hired by Leland Stanford, then governor of California, to settle a bet as to whether or not a horse had all four legs in the air during a race” (4). As early as 1872, Muybridge had been creating “motion studies” using numerous still-photo cameras and

trip wires to create a series of chronological sequential images that captured various animals in motion (3). Using this same technique in 1878, Muybridge was able demonstrate that all four legs of a galloping horse were lifted off the ground (4). By 1879, Muybridge was projecting “these brief segments of motion onto a screen for audiences” as clips made up of stills that were “run together rapidly to create the illusion of motion.”

It was, however, Thomas Edison, “who most clearly saw the profit potential of the new medium” in a series of short films that “photographed life in a direct and unadorned fashion” (8). In the undisguised, artificial spectacle of Edison’s early films, the human body is the central focus. The films depicted actors in various stages of “work . . . play . . . or preening for the camera” against “simple black backgrounds” (8). Edison, driven by the knowledge that “by appealing to the basest appetites of his viewers he was simultaneously pursuing the surest avenue to commercial success,” went on to create films such as *Boxing Match* (1894), which depicted “exaggerated masculinity”; *The Kiss* (1896), which displayed “stylized sensuality”; and *Rat Killing* (1894), which depicted a dog killing a group of rats and exemplifies Edison’s taste for the bizarre (9). Screenings of Edison’s films were called “nickelodeons,” owing to the fact that admission cost a nickel, and were frequented by individuals of a “generally rough reputation and often a fly-by-night quality” (11). Edison’s “ultra-commercial films” which presented “a world of idealized romantic couples, racist stereotypes, and relentless exoticism, leavened with a healthy dose of sadism and voyeurism,” was exactly “what the public wanted” and as a result, not only laid down the tenets that continue to influence “commercial Hollywood movie production, distribution, and exhibition” (10) even today.

While Edison's films enthralled their audiences with unadulterated spectacle, Georges Méliès, former magician turned cinematic artist, experimented with illusion and the creation of other worlds (11). In fact, "Méliès's most famous film, *Le Voyage dans la lune* (1902), distributed in the United States and England as *A Trip to the Moon*, ranks as one of the cinema's first (if not the first) science fiction films, combining spectacle, sensation, and technical wizardry to create a cosmic fantasy that was an international sensation" (12). It was also one of the first known films to incorporate a structured narrative despite being only fourteen minutes long, and set the standard for the conventions of the science fiction film: A scientist and his associates build a rocket and crash land on the moon. The scientists are captured by the moon's hostile inhabitants, who take the scientists to their sovereign. The lead scientist fights and defeats the ruler of the moon and escapes back to Earth in the rocket with the rest of his team.

In the same way that the tropes of science fiction in Méliès's *Le Voyage dans la lune* influenced future science fiction films, Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) "presents in microcosm the basic generic conventions of the western in a violent, one-reel short film" (17). Bandits hijack a train and in the process of robbing the train's passengers kill the train's engineer, the mailroom attendant, and one of the passengers. The bandits are then chased by "a posse in hot pursuit, who shoot them down in the woods." The first big-budget narrative film that incorporated "an amalgamation of techniques to create a deeper use of close-ups, cross-cutting for suspense, the use of fade-outs to express the passage of time, and other refinements" was D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), which, influenced by the longer films of the Italian cinema, was close to two and a half hours long (22-24). The film portrayed

an overtly racist view of African Americans in “the American South during the Civil War. It’s final scene for example, depicts the Ku Klux Klan as heroic figures who save the damsels in distress (Lillian Gish and Miriam Cooper) “from attempted rape by a band of marauding blacks” (24).

In 1914, the advent of World War I slowed the production of film in Europe, especially in Italy and France, to a near halt. However, “[f]rom 1914 to 1918, while the rest of the world concentrated on fighting the innumerable battles of the war, America kept cranking out a steady stream of film productions for international distribution” (32). All of the films produced during this nascent period in cinematography were, of course, silent films. Intertitles, the grandfather of today’s movie subtitles, provided explanations for narrative action and could simply be changed from country to country. Sound accompaniment came from either live piano music or pre-recorded audio which was played in synchronization with the moving images projected on the screen. It was not until 1927 that the first “talkie,” or “feature film with talking sequences,” was revealed in the form of *The Jazz Singer*, produced by Warner Bros. and directed by Alan Crosland. “Almost overnight, silent films were nothing more than a memory” (89) and “a new era was born” (90), which required a “standardized system” for sound in the movie theatres. The introduction of sound-on-film, besides being a major financial and technological success for the film industry, was also, perhaps, rather timely. In 1929, with “the onset of the Great Depression,” the movie theatre was where the public sought solace from “the real desperation of their own increasing uncertain lives.” By 1930, the “populace deprived of the real American dream” immersed themselves in “the escapist fantasies of the Hollywood dream factory.”

While the public was enthralled by the novelty of the talkies, critics' opinions ranged from the mild commentary by Ernest Betts,¹⁰ who thought that the Warner Bros. were "unbrotherly" in their "act of putting sound into films" (7) and René Clair's lamentation¹¹ of the "barbaric invasion" suffered by "the art of moving pictures." It is quite probable, however, that no one in the world was more horrified with the cinema in general, and the talkie and *The Jazz Singer* in particular, than Aldous Huxley. In 1929, Huxley penned an essay titled, "Silence is Golden," in which he recounts his own experience of watching *The Jazz Singer* at a cinema in Paris:

Some sort of comedian was performing as we entered. But he soon vanished to give place to somebody's celebrated jazz-band – not merely audible in all its loud vulgarity of brassy guffaw and caterwauling sentiment, but also visible in a series of apocalyptic close-ups of the individual performers. . . . At the cinema, however, there is no escape. . . . Nothing short of total blindness can preserve one from the spectacle. The jazz-players were forced upon me; I regarded them with a fascinated horror. . . . The spectacle was positively terrifying. . . . And at the same time, I wished that I could become, for the occasion, a little hard of hearing. (47-8)

Two years after his night at the movies, Huxley wrote the science fiction novel *Brave New World* (1931), which depicts Huxley's visions of a truly terrifying dystopic world where identical human embryos are "hatched" from bottles on a conveyor belt, children are conditioned through "sleep-teaching," and virtually all human freedoms are controlled by a godlike State. While the abuse of science as a tool for the manipulation of nature and the individual psyche is an overt theme in the novel, Huxley's description of the experience of the "feelies," one of the State-sanctioned forms of visual entertainment in *Brave New World*, is most relevant in light of Huxley's review of *The Jazz Singer*:

In the synthetic music machine the soundtrack roll began to unwind. It was a trio for hyper-violin, super-cello and oboe-surrogate that now filled the air with

¹⁰ "Ordeal by Talkie" (1929).

¹¹ "The Art of Sound" (1929).

agreeable languor. . . . The house lights went down; fiery letters stood out solid and as though self-supported in the darkness. THREE WEEKS IN A HELICOPTER. AN ALL-SUPER-SINGING, SYNTHETIC-TALKING, COLOURED, STEREOSCOPIC FEELY. WITH SYNCHRONIZED SCENT ORGAN ACCOMPANIMENT. . . . then suddenly, dazzling and incomparably more solid-looking than they would have seemed in actual flesh and blood, far more real than reality, there stood the stereoscopic images, locked in one another's arms, of a gigantic negro and a golden-haired young brachycephalic Beta-Plus female. . . . the stereoscopic lips came together . . . and . . . the facial erogenous zones of the six thousand spectators in the Alhambra tingled with almost intolerable galvanic pleasure. (167-8)

In the above passage, the cacophony of the instruments echoes the “loud vulgarity” of the jazz-band from Huxley’s cinema experience. The enormity of the “stereoscopic images” are curiously similar to the “apocalyptic close-ups” of the actors in *The Jazz Singer*. In *Brave New World*, Huxley’s description of the “feely,” a type of movie which stimulates the five human senses of the watcher, is obviously an attack on the movie industry of the time period. Furthermore, the complete, unified surrender of the audience members to the physical sensations of the virtual kiss in the “feely” is clearly an attack on the movie-going public of Huxley’s time. For Huxley, the public of his time was one in which “the immemorial decencies find it hard to flourish” and *The Jazz Singer*, “a corruption” effected by the Hollywood film industry (“Silence is Golden” 48).

One element in Huxley’s description of the “feely” is rather uncanny in that it effectively predicts the advent of color film. In 1935, three years after the publication of *Brave New World*, “Hollywood produced its first three-strip Technicolor feature film, Mamoulian’s *Becky Sharp*” (Dixon and Audrey 96). In the decade that followed, the use of Technicolor became more prominent in feature films such as the Hollywood classics of *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). It is of great significance that during this period of growing popularity for the Technicolor film, the production of

black and white films “developed into a highly sophisticated art, with the introduction of more sensitive film and the [use of] adventurous lighting patterns.”

In *Hollywood Gamers: Digital Convergence in the Film and Video Game Industries* (2010), Robert Alan Brookey uses a comparative approach to explore intertextuality in cinematic video game cut-scenes and film. Cut-scenes in video games are not rendered in real-time, and therefore are often graphically enhanced and employ cinematic techniques in much the same way that they are used in the production of animated films. Furthermore, cut-scenes are “often used to forward the storyline of a game . . . and to that end they may resemble scenes from narrative films” (19).

According to Brookey, in-game limitations on player agency often “do not always allow for the kinds of [narrative] changes that could be equated with ideological resistance” and Brookey characterises cut-scenes as having “a predetermined message,” and “can convey ideological messages” while giving the player “the least agency” (35). However, as the second and third chapters of this thesis will attempt to show, in contemporary video games, these paths of ideological resistance are increasingly becoming a big part of gameplay.

D. The Electronic Hearth: From Idiot Box to Intelligent Television

Towards the end of the 1940s, the Hollywood industry experienced yet another shift in momentum which was the direct result of a rapidly growing television industry. According to Gary R. Edgerton in *The Columbia History of American Television* (2007), “[i]n 1946, movies and radio were entertaining their greatest audiences ever, while a small number of TV programs were broadcast a few evening hours per week to just several thousand sets displayed in appliance stores, barrooms, and fortunate big city

living rooms” (102). Nine years later, in 1955, “television dominated popular entertainment” with roughly “two-thirds of all American homes [owning] a TV set, while public activities of all kinds (from movie going, juke box playing, and magazine reading to library book borrowing) declined.” While the adoption of television sets into the private home was a gradual process due to the high prices of early units, the ease with which numerous television programs were created and broadcast once televisions did invade the family home is owed, in part, to the medium of the radio. The body of forms and variety of genres that existed as radio entertainment – “news and current affairs coverage, political reportage and sports broadcasting . . . the format of quiz shows, soap operas . . . and situation comedies (‘sitcoms’)” – were seamlessly re-appropriated for television broadcasting and “have scarcely changed at all since radio invented them in the first half of the twentieth century” (Hand and Traynor 13).

Like radio and film before it, television’s rise to popularity brought with it a new set of cultural concerns. In a post-World War II America, the “broadcasters, station owners, and manufacturers of television sets” promoted television as an “electronic hearth” around which the “middle-class nuclear family” could bond (Edgerton 92). Social critics, on the other hand, had a vision of television that was not unlike Huxley’s opinion of the film industry. “[E]ducators warned that too much viewing might create a generation of passive, pale “bug-eyed” children” while social critics feared that “husbands’ attention would stray from their wives due to the allure of televised sports and scantily clad showgirls seen on TV” (94). However, while it was assumed that men had the right “to watch sporting events” and children had the right “to be entertained by puppets,” the dangers that television presented were far more detrimental to the figure of the faithful, doting housewife of the 1950s nuclear family (97). Critics *and*

supporters of the medium worried that “wives would quit attending to their domestic duties if there were paying rapt attention to TV.” In 1952, the American market responded to this concern with the “ingenious combination TV and stove” that would allow “women to combine their chores with pleasure.”

In “‘This is Intelligent Television’: Early Video Games and Television in the Emergence of the Personal Computer” (2009), Sheila C. Murphy contextualizes the video game by placing it within the evolution of digital media. She focuses on the connection between television, video game systems and personal computers as media apparatuses and their screens as sites of representation (197-8). Murphy contends that the relationship between the television and video games was a symbiotic one – a product of a technological and cultural convergence, or merging, of mediums – and a phenomena that occurs alongside shifts in market strategy as well as technological, economic and cultural evolution (199). Before the video game entered the privacy of the family home in the early 1980s, it enjoyed popularity within the commercial and social setting of the video game arcade during the 1970s. In 1979, Mattel Electronics introduced the Intellivision, a home gaming system that was meant for use with the home television set and advertised as being the “intelligent” television system, to the public (197). However, the late 1970s was also a period during which a new innovative technological apparatus was also being experimented with – the personal computer. Coincidentally, the Intellivision did not just provide a platform for family entertainment. Along with video game cartridges, Mattel Electronics also offered software cartridges for stock market analysis, learning conversational French and Spanish, and writing basic programs, as well as cartridges for data storage – making the Intellivision one of the earliest examples of personal computer utility (*Intellivision Intelligent Television* 1981).

The early version of the personal computer was developed by academic researchers and computer technology enthusiasts. These first machines were built with a utilitarian function in mind – productivity within the home and workplace. As Murphy puts it, they were “task-oriented”, but their novelty was also considered a spectacle (201). Meanwhile, the entertainment industry found a way to capitalize upon this new innovation by creating a computer system (essentially the nascent form of contemporary gaming consoles) that could be used with the home television set to play rudimentary games from a set of cartridges. Although the public was at first wary of what was perceived to be “strange and mysterious” technology, by the mid-1970s the idea of the “television as a playable consumer device” had become widespread, and the common belief that the television was “for *watching* and not *playing*” began to fade (202). The divide between work and play, the personal computer’s functionality and leisurely video games, was naturalized during this early period, despite some overlap between the two very similar technologies (203).

E. The First Adventures: A Very Brief History of the Role-Playing Games

The history of video games is a rather short one in comparison to other narrative forms and encompasses the span of a little over 50 years. In *Dungeons and Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games*, video game historian and English professor Matt Barton tracks the evolution of the role-playing game (RPG), and divides the time period of the commercial conception of role-playing games into six ages: Dark, Bronze, Silver, Golden, Platinum and Modern (10-11). Before delving into specific computer games that were conceived within each time period, Barton begins with the table-top fantasy game *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974), created by Gary Gygax

and Dave Arneson, popularly known as *D&D*, which became a significant cultural phenomenon in the early 1970s (24). As gameplay developed and became more complex, instead of using miniatures to represent their characters as they had previously, inventive *D&D* players assumed the roles of their character classes, wearing costumes and delivering lines while playing the game in open spaces – mass behaviour known as “live-action role-play”, or LARP (25), which in turn likely influenced the costume culture called “cosplay” today. The relationship of *D&D* and literature is markedly closer than one might assume, since the inspiration for the world and characters that make up the game is derived from J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), which was mass published by Ballantine Books only in the 1960s (Barton 22). Tolkien “paved the way for a new type of game, one that would allow fans to go beyond reading and actually enter exciting worlds of fantasy to play a role in their own adventures” (24). Through his meticulous creation of a believable yet entirely alternate reality, Tolkien incited the human imagination to create its own story within a fantastical world.

Contemporary RPGs follow the same traditional formula of gameplay as the table-top *D&D*, albeit with embellishments and complexities that derive from advanced programming abilities.

“Players first choose a character class, such as warrior or wizard, and then gain experience points as they progress through the game, finding treasure and other items and conquering ever more powerful foes... Once enough points are accumulated, the character can gain a level, thereby gaining a number of new skills, abilities, and hit points.” (Barton, 24)

The old formula, however, dictates the necessity for a central narrative as presented by game developers, and thus older games, in which player agency is limited – such as the

King's Quest series (Sierra Entertainment 1984-98), would likely be perceived as too linear for the avid gamer of contemporary open-world adventure games, in which player agency is wide in scope – such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda 2011). Barton places these older, linear games under the Silver Age, which, beginning in the early 1980s, marks a period in which the role-playing game became more commercially available to the average consumer with a personal computer (66). Before the Silver Age game development was often an ambitious, personal project engaged in by developers, and thus something akin to a hobby. The end result was often an obscure product that was too difficult for mainstream use and too expensive for the average gamer to acquire (33-47).

The first computer role-playing game that targeted a wide audience was *Ultima* (California Pacific 1981), developed by Richard Garriott and Ken Arnold. *Ultima* was one of the first commercially available games in which the narrative was quest-oriented, meaning that game-play revolved around a single, central mission: travel back in time and kill the wizard Mondain before he takes over the world through the use of his evil powers (Barton 68). Although the system for player advancement as established by *D&D* was employed as a template, the only actions that a player could perform within the world of the game revolved around that central quest. Future games followed the same restrictive model. Narratives in these games, were presented in thick descriptive booklets and human imagination played a large role in overall enjoyment and understanding of the plot and events. As computing technology advanced, the way that narrative was presented in games evolved from physical textual accompaniment, to the presentation of text on the computer screen, to in-game narration, to in-game cinematic sequences that illustrated important narrative events (also called cut-scenes) and finally

to the form in which they currently exist, in which the player has a hand in shaping, and sometimes creating, her own narrative.

In 1992, Bethesda released *Ultima VII: The Black Gate*, a role-playing game which, while still quite linear and reliant on a central quest, introduced a new element in the form of allowing players to perform actions that did not contribute to character advancement or plot progression. That element was the idea of open-ended gameplay. A central plot, or quest is still at play in *The Black Gate*, but what set the game apart from previously rendered games was that a player could indefinitely postpone the quest's completion. In addition, there was a level of interactivity previously unseen in other video games. "How many CRPGs do you know that will let you milk cows and change a baby's diapers just for the heck of it?" (Barton 164). Whether players milked the cow or not depended entirely upon the imagination and human curiosity that was embedded in what was a novel format – for both video game developers and players – at the time: an interactive game world. Despite these revolutionary elements, which were greatly appealing for gamers at the time, most role-playing games did not exploit those capabilities to their full potential until more recently.

As previously mentioned, before game developers began to explore more complex levels of player interaction and agency that exist in contemporary video games, game narratives were uniformly "presented" via text alongside images, by way of voice narration, through the use of cut-scenes triggered by player activity (such as the opening of a door), or various combinations of the aforementioned techniques. In contemporary games, which feature expansive traversable worlds, innumerable in-game objects, miscellaneous quests to uncover, alternative endings and a wider scope of player agency, the player is increasingly becoming more responsible for narrative progression.

F. A Word of Explanation: What is a Narrative Game?

Because this thesis is primarily focused on exploring the complexities of the narrative experience of video game play, only games that might be considered to be role-playing, narrative games will be explored in the following chapters. However, the specification of genre is as problematic for the video game as it has been for traditional narrative forms, especially as games evolved into their complex, contemporary forms. In general, there are four broad categories under which video games may be divided: action, adventure, strategy and process-oriented (Nielsen, Smith and Tosca 43). Action games often contain spatial puzzles that require motor skills and hand-eye coordination on the part of the player as well as some form of fighting. First-person shooters (FPS) and platform games often fall under this category (43). These types of games may or may not include a central narrative, but – as is the case in games like the FPS, *Doom* (id Software 1993), and the classic platformer, *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo 1985) – narrative is secondary to gameplay, and the game can be completed without any special attention to plot or story. That is not to say that narrative is not a central factor at all. For example, in the recent *Metro: Last Light* (Deep Silver 2013)¹² and *Stick It to the Man* (Zoink Games 2014)¹³ narrative is one of the driving forces of gameplay. Adventure games, on the other hand, are highly narrative-oriented and require the player to use deductive reasoning to solve puzzles to propel the story forward. Attention to the narrative is crucial to the completion of these types of games. Nielsen, Smith and Tosca incorporate the single-player role-playing game (RPG), an evolution of the classic table-top role-playing game, into this category (43).

¹² *Metro: Last Light* is a first-person shooter in which the player assumes the role of Artyom, a young man in post-apocalyptic Russia.

¹³ In this platform game, the player assumes the role of Ray, a blue collar worker who, after an accident at work, wakes up with the ability to read minds.

Strategy games exist in two types and fall between the action and adventure categories and often center around a narrative of war, imperialist conquest or the acquisition of power. Resembling the traditional board game in which a player takes on a role as an outside manipulator of game elements, the strategy game requires, as its name suggests, strategic decision-making in moving against opponents or resolving conflicts generated by the game, much as is the case in a chess game. Typology under this category is differentiated by the continuity in time when in-game actions are performed. In the real-time (or continuous-time) strategy game, time is constantly moving and game events occur depending on whether or not the player reacts and/or how quickly a decision is made. In the turn-based strategy game, time is stopped while a player decides what move to make next, which arguably lessens the tension that might be felt in games in which actions and outcomes are dependent upon time. The process-oriented game, rather than focusing on the achievement of specific, linear goals, involves the creation of a system for the player to explore and manipulate. Many types of process-oriented games fall under the subcategory of simulation games, which are mimetic of real-world experiences. (43-4)

Attempts to categorize contemporary video games can sometimes overlap across all four game models suggested by Nielsen, Smith and Tosca. Browsing the various category tags on online stores, gaming platforms and game-enthusiast websites reveals an assortment of user- and industry-defined categorizations: action-adventure, thriller shooter, horror adventure, strategy simulation, and a plethora of other combinations. Where does the narrative game fall within this expansive spectrum? The general definition of narrative games, as provided by Nielsen, Smith and Tosca, incorporates all games “in which stories play a significant role” (172). In the vast

expanse of complex, contemporary video games currently being produced, however, the inclusion of a well-designed narrative is increasingly becoming a standard requirement.

For the purposes of this thesis then, the definition of narrative games will encompass any genre or subgenre of video game from which a meaningful narrative can be inferred or produced. Even within the four broad categories of action, adventure, strategy and process-oriented games, narrative is manifested in some shape or form, whether or not it is central to gameplay, except perhaps in more abstract games such as *Tetris*, which may or may not carry symbolic significance.

G. War of the Worlds: Studies in Video Game Narrativity

As briefly noted earlier in this chapter, the game development industry at the time of writing is increasingly focused on exploring the ways in which the video game might be used to tell compelling stories. This focus toward narrative is an interesting turn of events, especially in light of one of the most heated debates in the academic study of video games: ludology versus narratology. In “Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and Differences Between Video Games and Narrative” (1999), Gonzalo Frasca argues that video games are, fundamentally, games and should be analysed as such. Frasca proposes the term “ludology” to designate a “discipline that studies game and play activities” as opposed to the narratological analysis of video games as narrative forms. One problem with Frasca’s proposal is that it only allows for the exploration of a single formal property of the video game. In Frasca’s narrow conception of ludology as a discipline, player experience, story elements, sound, and visuals – in fact all of the components that are combined in the form of the video game, aside from its fundamental system of rules for play – are completely disregarded. Frasca attempts to

discount the narrativity of gameplay with his example of a videotaped gameplay session. The videotape, he argues can be shown to “a public as a work of narrative” because to an external observer, a gameplay *session* will look like narrative *sequence*. “Observers,” he states, “are passive, the player is active. If the player does not act, there will be no game, and therefore no session at all. It is a completely different activity to watch a game and to play the game.” Frasca’s insinuation that the player of a video game is an active participant while the moviegoer is a passive observer of a film is ludicrous. Certainly, if a player does not play, there will be no game – there will only be code that has been compiled into software – but similarly, if a reader does not read, then there will be no narrative, only printed characters on paper that has been bound into book form.

Arguing against Frasca’s contention in “Theory Wars: An Argument Against Arguments in the So-called Ludology/Narratology Debate” (2005), game designer Celia Pearce asserts that rather than the attempt to distinguish between game and narrative, the more interesting avenue to explore is *how* video games are narrative.

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997), Murray identifies four essential properties that are intrinsic to the computer as a story telling medium. First, computers are procedural. In other words, they are dependent on the computer processor’s “defining ability to execute a series of rules” (71). Second, computers are participatory in the sense that they are responsive to user input (74). Third, computers are able to “represent navigable space” (79). Finally, computers can carry an enormous amount of information due to their encyclopedic nature (83). For Murray, “[t]he encyclopedic capacity of the computer . . . translates into an artist’s potential to offer a wealth of detail to represent the world with both scope and

particularity” (84). Writing from a nascent period in the development of video games, Murray proposes the use of the narrative model provided by Valdimir Propp in *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) for the creation of complex digital stories. While Murray does take the formal properties of the computer into account, her utopic visions for the future of digital storytelling – some of which have been realized and discussed in the following chapter of this thesis – the bulk of her expectations revolve around the creation of a narrative with near infinite possibilities, that is procedurally generated via a predetermined algorithm (based on Propp’s formula) and represented as an interactive world on the computer screen.

Among the various approaches to the study of video games across academic disciplines in the humanities, strangely enough, it is Jesper Juul, ludologist, who offers the most convincing perspective on narrative in the video game. In *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005) Juul asserts that, “on an experiential level, fiction *matters* in games, and it is important to remember the duality of the formal and the experiential perspective on fiction in games” (qtd. in Engfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca 197). The dual nature of narrativity in video games that Juul describes, echoes what is perhaps the most oft-cited quote from Espen Aarseth’s seminal work on the typology of the form of the cybertext, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997): “To claim that there is no difference between games and narratives is to ignore essential qualities of both categories. . . . the difference is not clear-cut, and there is significant overlap between the two” (5).

Rather than attempt to define the video game as “narrative” or “not narrative,” this thesis will explore the qualities and characteristics of the video game that pave the way for a *narrative experience*, or how story unfolds, during gameplay. Because the

object of study is the video game, various empirical and theoretical studies of the video game as a medium from a variety of disciplines, including anthropology (Pearce 2005), semiotics (Gee 2003) and theatre (Laurel 2014; Murray 1997) will be examined.

Furthermore, because the subject of study is narrative experience, narrative being the key word, several models for the quest narrative (Todorov 1969; Auden 1968; Campbell 1949; Propp 1928), models from interactive theatre (Homan 2015; Rhinehart 2014; White 2012) variations of reader-response theory (Rosenblatt 1978; Iser 1972; Gibson 1950) and Bakhtin's literary semiotics will be examined alongside video game studies in order to perform a comprehensive study of both the formal aspects of the video game, and the experiential perspective of the narrative experience of gameplay. The following chapter begins with a comparative analysis of the tropes of the quest narrative and how they apply to *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *Fable: The Lost Chapters*. In addition, player agency and the scope of in-game choices¹⁴ in both role-playing games will be considered in parallel with the dynamics of interactive theatre to illuminate how, if at all, the game player directs narrative progression.

¹⁴ In-game choices are the options offered to the player which may or may not affect the outcome of the narrative. These choices may be related to dialogue, action or plot progression. The more in-game choices the player is allowed to make and the variety of available choices offered to the player affect how much agency a player has in directing her narrative experience.

CHAPTER 2 IN WHICH A HERO IS BORN AND A JOURNEY IS TAKEN

A. Looking Behind: Revisiting the Monomyth

In the 1984 cult classic film *Footloose*, a young teenager, Ren McCormack, played by Kevin Bacon, is forced to move from the city of Chicago to the small town of Beaumont after the death of his mother. From the beginning of the movie it is clear that Ren is unhappy to be in Beaumont. Although he clashes with the town's various authority figures, he befriends another senior student named Willard (Chris Penn) and meets a potential love interest, Ariel Shaw (Lori Singer), who is a reverend's daughter. One day, Ren learns that music, and especially dancing, are illegal in Beaumont. Ren makes it his mission to change the law so that he and his classmates can hold their senior prom. In order to do this, he must stand up against the city council, which is made up of Reverend Shaw (John Lithgow) and other officials. Before the town meeting at which Ren is to make a speech, Ariel gives Ren a Bible from which Ren later cites verses that refer to dancing as a spiritual and celebratory act. Although the council votes against the prom, Ren's speech moves Reverend Shaw, who begins to doubt the validity of the law. By end the movie, Ren and his friend manage to arrange for a prom to be held, and the movie concludes with a choreographed dance to the movie's theme song, "Footloose." If we consider the character of Ren as the archetype of the hero, his goal of changing the law a quest of sorts, and Ariel, who gives him the Bible, the archetype of the "helper," then, essentially, Ren's narrative is that of the "Hero's Journey."

The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949) by Joseph Campbell, is a comprehensive study of the narrative structure of mythology, or what he terms the “monomyth”.¹⁵ Campbell’s premise is that myths from all over the world share the same seventeen-part narrative structure, beginning with a hero who experiences a call to adventure and ending with the hero’s return in triumph or failure. Through the retelling of Buddhist legends (29-32), Native American (63-64) and East African (49-51) parables, Irish folktales of the Prince of the Lonesome Isle and the Lady of Tubber Tintye (100-102) and numerous other fables, myths and legends from all around the world, Campbell shows how all of these stories are composed of his proposed stages of the Hero’s Journey in varying order. Campbell’s expansive study is indeed impressive but reads too much like a desperate religious manifesto that laments society’s lack of spirituality during the golden age of capitalism in the United States. “[T]he democratic ideal of the self-determining individual, the invention of the power-driven machine, and the development of the scientific method of research, have so transformed human life that the long-inherited, timeless universe of symbols has collapsed” (358). For Campbell, the function of the monomyth lies, like his Hero’s Journey, in its final goal – “to dispel the need for...life ignorance by effecting a reconciliation of the individual consciousness with universal will” (221).

Campbell was certainly not the first to discover the structure of the Hero’s Journey. Several critical works that are far less spiritually zealous than Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* have dealt with variants of the same trope. Decades before Campbell, Russian formalist Vladimir Propp had posited the existence of a similar formulaic pattern in his structural analysis of the folktale. Published in Russian in 1928

¹⁵ Campbell borrows the term “monomyth” from *Finnegan’s Wake* by James Joyce.

and first translated into English in 1959, Propp's theoretical work, *Morphology of the Folktale*, outlines thirty-one possible actions that make up the narrative structure of the fairy tale (25-65).¹⁶ Beginning with a central conflict that is caused by the archetype of the villain, the hero in Propp's model must resolve this conflict. The hero is then rewarded and the villain is punished. Propp's list of functions is far more extensive than Campbell's, but he also notes that the narrative structure of a fairy tale may not be composed of every single function that he defines. Rather, any number of the functions may be combined in varying order to tell a story (99). Another later and more simplified version of the plot structure of the Hero's Journey can be found in poet W.H. Auden's critical essay, "The Quest Hero" (1968). In his examination of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien, Auden delineates six vital elements of a typical quest narrative (44). For Auden, the quest narrative traditionally exists in two forms (46). The first form is that of the epic narrative, in which the Quest Hero's *arete*, or "excellence," is superior and renowned. Auden provides the example of Jason, who "is instantly recognizable as the kind of man who can win the Golden Fleece if anybody can." The second type is that common to fairy tales, in which the hero's abilities are not at all apparent. This unlikely hero, often an everyman, succeeds in his quest only after receiving aid from other characters. The Quest Hero's ultimate goal is "the winning or recovery of [a] Precious Object [and/or person]." Sometimes this goal benefits "the common good of the society to which the hero belongs," but at other times, the goal is personal and "of importance only to the individual who achieves it."

¹⁶ "Function is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action" (21). According to Propp, "action" is the function defined in terms of a noun that expresses an action. To use Propp's example, "Ivan marries a tsar's daughter" is the function. In Propp's morphology, this is action number thirty-one, "The Hero is Married and Ascends the Throne" and the active noun that expresses the function is *wedding* (63).

What is most interesting about Auden's essay is that, while the key examples that he uses to illustrate his six structural elements come from mythology, folklore, and the fantasy genre, he does not ignore the fact that the literature of the canon as well that of popular culture are replete with narratives that are situated around the motif of the quest (47). The detective story, for example, is a variation of the quest narrative in which the hero's ultimate goal is to find out who committed the crime. The hero is, of course, the detective in pursuit of this answer. Another variation of the quest narrative is binary opposition to the goal of the traditional quest. Auden cites the example of *Moby Dick*, in which the "object of the Quest is not possession, but destruction" and, therefore, evil. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* is an example of the adventure story, in which the goal and journey are one in the same, "for the Quest is for more and more adventures."

Tsvetan Todorov's model for narrative structure is even more indiscriminate of genre and simplified into the most basic units of plot. In "Structural Analysis of Narrative" (1969), Todorov outlines a broad scheme for structural analysis of literature using the courtly tales in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*. According to Todorov, the "understanding of literature" is the understanding of plot, which includes "narrative mood, or point of view, or sequence" (75). Following this line, he proposes a general typology of plot that he describes "as the shift from one equilibrium to another." The term equilibrium designates "the existence of a stable but not static relation between the members of a society; it is a social law, a rule of the game, a particular system of exchange." In essence, Todorov's plot structure is a cyclical movement from one moment of equilibrium, to a degeneration of that stability and finally, the establishment

of a new state of equilibrium. The text, or the story, “is basically the description of an improvement process-until the flaw is no longer there.”

B. Quite a Merry Gathering: Narrative Models and RPGs

If we compare Todorov’s model for narrative structure to the models for the structure of myth, fairytales and fantasy as proposed by Campbell, Propp and Auden respectively, it appears that all these models share the several key elements: 1) A conflict arises; 2) A hero attempts to resolve that conflict; 3) The hero either succeeds or fails at his/her attempt; 4) A new state of equilibrium is established. If we apply this stripped down model to the role-playing video game, then the plot structure outlined previously is what is known as the “main quest” of the game, or the game’s main narrative which the player has to complete to finish the game. For example, in the recent remaster of the 1998 classic point-and-click adventure game, *Grim Fandango* (Double Fine, 2015), the player assumes the role of a grim reaper and sales agent in the Department of Death, Manny Calavera, who lives in the city of El Marrow in the Land of the Dead. Not only is Calavera responsible for harvesting souls of the dead, but he must also provide them with travel packages to the Ninth Underworld, where dead souls go to rest. The souls of people who were morally good during their lifetime are offered a ticket to the Number Nine train, while those who have been evil are given a walking stick and must make the four year trip to the Ninth Underworld on foot. Manny is having a rough time at work because no good souls are coming his way. His boss, Don Copal, threatens to fire him if he does not start finding morally good clients who are worthy of better, and more expensive, travel packages. This is the disruption of equilibrium, or the problem that arises.

After mistakenly sending the saintly soul of a woman named Meche Mercedes on foot to the underworld, Manny discovers that he is being set up by Don and rival salesman Domino, who are denying good clients the valuable tickets on the Number Nine and selling them to the highest bidder for profit under the direction of criminal underworld boss Hector Le Mans. Manny realizes that he has no power to stop the evil duo. He runs away with the help of his demon driver Glottis and spends the next year trying to find Mercedes so that he can apologize for his mistake. Manny now becomes the archetypical hero who attempts to restore equilibrium. When he does find her, she is being held captive by Domino, and Manny rescues her. He then travels back to El Marro with Glottis and Mercedes to defeat Hector, retrieves all of the stolen train tickets and returns them to their rightful owners. Manny succeeds in righting the wrong that has been done. The lost and wandering souls, along with Mercedes and finally Manny, who receives a ticket as his reward for his good deeds, board the Number Nine train to the Ninth Underworld.

One other characteristic that Campbell, Propp and Auden's models for narrative structure share, is that all the structural elements are interchangeable and do not have to occur chronologically. In *Grim Fandango*, Calavera is not concerned so much with stopping Hector's outrageous scam as he is with finding and apologizing to Mercedes. Hector and Domino's defeat is almost a consequence of finding and saving Mercedes. Todorov's model also makes room for these inconsistencies. A story does not have to begin with a balanced state. For example, a story can "begin in the middle of a complete cycle, with a state of imbalance created by a flaw in one of the characters" (75). The opening scene of the 2005 story-driven action game *God of War* (Sony Computer Entertainment), begins with Kratos, the player-character, jumping off a cliff

to escape his inner demons. It is later revealed that Kratos was a human trained by Ares, the God of War. Over the years, Kratos becomes a skilled Spartan fighter with a growing army of thousands, slaughtering entire villages of people in the name of Ares. Consumed by power, desire for conquest and brutal bloodlust, Kratos falls into a trap that Ares creates to test him and mistakenly murders his own wife and child. Kratos, cursed to wear the white ashes of his murdered family on his skin for eternity, is overwhelmed by feelings of grief and betrayal, “the glory he had revelled in, turned to horror,” and naturally, he vows revenge. The details of these events are revealed in installments over the course of gameplay via cutscenes. Gameplay begins after these events have occurred, and the main quest is to guide Kratos to Pandora’s Box – “the only item in the world,” as the Goddess Athena tells him, “that can defeat a god.” Throughout his journey in *God of War* and in the two subsequent sequels of the game, it is apparent that Kratos experiences shame for his past disregard for human life. At the end of the series, in *God of War III* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2009), Kratos sacrifices his own life in an attempt to restore the power of Hope to mankind.

That the narrative models proposed by Todorov, Propp, Campbell, and Auden have their roots in courtly tales, folktales, legend and myth and fantasy respectively, make them interesting to consider in the case of contemporary epic fantasy role-playing adventure games, in particular *Fable: The Lost Chapters* (Microsoft Game Studios, 2004) and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011) Unlike *Grim Fandango* and *God of War*, in which the entire narrative sequence is predetermined by game designers, *Fable* and *Skyrim* offer a different kind of experience for narrative progression that is dependent on player agency while also remaining structured around a scripted, linear plot. In both games, the central narrative, which will be referred to as the

“main quest”, is that of the hero’s journey. Games like *Grim Fandango* and *God of War* are made up entirely of a single episodic main quest which reveals the plot line as each episode is completed. *Skyrim* and *Fable*, on the other hand, offer additional episodes that do not have to be completed in order to end, or “win,” the game. These will be referred to here as “side quests.” In both of these video games, the player assumes the role of a hero and the world state is in disequilibrium. The final goal is to restore equilibrium.

In *Fable*, the main quest is separated into twenty-six different episodes, which will henceforth be referred to as “missions,” that span the lifetime of the player-character. *Fable* begins with a short opening sequence, in which a narrator’s voice introduces “the small town of Oakvale” in the kingdom of Albion, “unchanged by time and untouched by the sword,” in which there “lived a boy and his family, dreaming of greatness, of one day being a hero.” After a short portion of gameplay, in which the player-character (the boy) must buy his older sister a birthday present, an animated sequence of events takes place, during which “the boy” witnesses the slaughter of the inhabitants of Oakvale, the murder of his father, and the torture and kidnapping of his mother and sister by a group of bandits who are apparently looking for him. Once the massacre is over and the bandits escape, the boy is approached by a man who identifies himself as Maze, the head of the Guild of Heroes. For the duration of the game, each mission in the main quest follows the story of the boy’s adolescent years-in-training at the guild, to the day he leaves the guild as a fully-trained hero to make his name in the world, to the time when he finally avenges his dead family and, in the process, saves all of Albion from destruction.

Skyrim, on the other hand, offers two main quests, one of which is completely optional and which also varies, depending on a single choice that the player is able to make up to a certain point in the scripted storyline. This second main quest will be discussed later in this chapter. The game opens with a black screen. In the background, the player can hear the sounds of a horse. Slowly, the animated scene fades in, creating the illusion of waking up from sleep. At this point, the only action afforded by the game is the ability to look around. Doing so reveals that the player-character is in a horse-drawn wagon that is travelling through a forest. On board, there are three other male passengers, whose hands are bound. One of the men notices that the player-character is “finally awake” and asks if “you were trying to cross the border.” He continues, “Walked right into that Imperial ambush, same as us, and that thief over there.” The player-character is not given the option to say anything, but a conversation between two of the men takes place during which the player learns that that one of the men in the wagon is Ulfric Stormcloak, the leader of a rebel group, aptly named the “Stormcloaks,” who are in an ongoing conflict with the “Empire.” Everyone in the wagon is being transported to Helgen, the site of their execution. As the player-character lies down on the chopping block, a dragon appears in the sky and attacks. During this attack, the player is given a choice of following one of two characters – the first a Stormcloak named Ralof, and the second an Imperial soldier named Hadvar. Soon after this sequence – during which the player must escape the area – is completed, the player-character is revealed to be the last “Dragonborn,” one who is born with the ability to absorb the souls of dead dragons and harness their power. The non-optional main quest, made up of a sequence of seventeen missions, is composed of learning the secret powers

of the Dragonborn – also known as the “Shout” – discovering why dragons have suddenly reappeared in the land of Skyrim and finally, to end the civil war.

C. All the World’s a Stage: The Player as Performer

In *Computers as Theatre*, Brenda Laurel investigates the possibilities for the computer serving as a stage and proposes what she calls a “poetics of interactive form” (41) for human and computer interaction, based in part on Aristotle’s dramatic theory in the *Poetics*. In fact a large portion of Laurel’s book resembles a handbook of Aristotelian thought. For Laurel, drama is the representation of a complete action as an “*organic whole*” that has a beginning, middle and end (57). Laurel contends that “[t]he most important way in which applications, like plays, are individuated from one another is by the particular actions that they represent” (53).¹⁷ Applications designed for word processing or creating spreadsheets are known as “productivity” applications. Those designed for drawing or music creation are “creativity” applications. Adventure, action, and strategy games, are “entertainment” applications. Disappointingly, the title of Laurel’s work is terribly misleading. Laurel’s premise revolves around the metaphor of the computer as a “stage” for functional activities but not for theatre. While Laurel asserts that “designing human-computer experience” is “about creating imaginary worlds that can have a special relationship to reality – a world in which we can extend, amplify and enrich our own capacities to think, feel and act” (32), the bulk of her text explores mundane human-computer actions such as the creation of a spreadsheet.

In all fairness, Laurel’s book is fundamentally a survey of possibilities for interactive design. Even in the case of spreadsheet creation, one can certainly

¹⁷ Emphasis in original

understand how the computer might be conceived of as a stage in which action is performed, albeit not the dramatic action that one would expect in a conventional theatrical performance. When it comes to video games however, it certainly makes more sense to explore the computer as a theatre, or playhouse, in which the occurrence of dramatic narrative action is a possibility. The game world, populated by actors and decorated with scenery and props, is the stage within the theatre. The game designers are the producers, who work in collaboration with sound engineers, writers, artists and computer programmers to write the script for, and stage the entire production of, a video game. The player of the role-playing game is at once an actor on the stage, as well as the audience of the narrative action. In addition, as this thesis will attempt to show later in this chapter, in many cases the player is also the director of narrative progression.

Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* is a comprehensive exploration of the potential that computers have for storytelling. Writing in 1997, at a time where computer technology was far less advanced than it currently is, Murray's vision for the future of digital story telling might be characterized by a single word (one that she repeatedly uses in the whole text): enchantment. Murray explores the computer as a stage for "cyberdrama," one that allows the audience or interactor to experience agency in the form of meaningful action (126). What the world, or at least Murray, awaited in 1997 was the arrival of the "cyberbard" whose narratives would be equivalent to traditional paintings novels, plays and film. Murray stresses the importance of total immersion in a rather utopic hypothesis for a digital narrative in which interface is invisible, and the participant is consumed with story. Realistically, no matter how high the level of engagement, subconsciously a reader knows that they are reading a novel. The passionate filmgoer knows that the events on the screen are part of a film. The

audience members at a play know that they are watching a play. As believable as the worlds created with the wearable augmented reality devices such as the recently developed Oculus Rift may be, some part of wearer's consciousness knows that what she is experiencing is not real in the literal sense. Despite Murray's zealous enthusiasm however, the reader of *Hamlet on the Holodeck* in 2015 is likely to find her model for an interactive, immersive digital cyberdrama based off of the 1942 film *Casablanca* rather uncanny:

We could begin by building a representation of the city itself as an immersive environment, including several nightclubs, with illegal gambling in a back room and a private office for the manager; some seedy hotels with dingy guest rooms; and an outdoor market with vendors' stalls. We might also create taxicabs, a bank, some private homes . . . [t]he interactor would be able to buy food and drink, walk and take taxis, touch things and people, and engage in dialogue. . . . We would then decide on the thematic units or morphemes of the story. . . . These events would be built up from the basic formulaic elements of touching, taking, moving, speaking, and so on, and they would fit together in a prespecified, multiform way, like events in a Russian fairy tale, to form a number of coherent plots. . . . the story choices should lead to consequences that are serious on many levels. . . . The more freedom the interactor feels, the more powerful the sense of plot. Since plot is a function of causality, it is crucial to reinforce the sense that the interactor's choices have led to the events of the story. (204-8)

Unlike classic point-and-click adventure games such as the aforementioned *Grim Fandango*, in which the game world is presented as separate, navigable scenes and in which the player may only interact with a few key game objects, recent video games offer precisely the kind of open-world digital environments that Murray describes. In the *Grand Theft Auto* series (Rockstar Games, 1997-2013), for example, in which the player-character is usually a criminal, players can hijack cars and drive from one end of the digitally rendered city to another. They can enter weapons and clothes

shops, visit bars to play billiards or darts, take girlfriends¹⁸ on dates at restaurants and cause altercations with the police that end in high speed car chases. They may even choose to play the vigilante and stop crime, as the city is alive with inhabitants going about their business. Another good example of a video game that features the kind of world that Murray describes is the first-person shooter series *Far Cry* (Ubisoft, 2004-14), in which the player must navigate in African grasslands, dense Pacific island jungles or the rocky tundra of the Himalayas in which at any given moment, they may be attacked by local wildlife or the main antagonist's henchmen.

One of the most expansive game worlds to be featured in a product of the video game industry in recent years is certainly that of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, which features the medieval realm of Skyrim, reminiscent of Tolkien's Middle Earth, on the fictional continent of Tamriel. Skyrim is dotted with sixteen towns and cities, spread across a varied landscape of forests, snow-capped mountains and cliffs, tundra plains, and flat grasslands – each a host to a numerous assortment of flora and fauna. Hidden within the terrain are abandoned mines, bandit lairs, caves and a variety of other structures and curious hidden crannies. The towns and cities of Skyrim are dense with inhabitants of thirteen different fictional races (among them Elves, Orcs and Nords), each possessing an extensive social and political history and unique culture. During the daytime, these NPCs go about their business, tending to their vegetable gardens, running errands, trading in the marketplace, drinking in the taverns, arguing with one another, or gossiping about other NPCs. Children chase one another, fight and play. City and town authorities are on patrol during the day and night, keeping the peace and

¹⁸ The video game industry in Europe and North America is male-dominated. Video games have been criticized repeatedly in the media for continually targeting and catering to a Western audience made up primarily of male adolescents.

stopping crime in its tracks. Even the wildlife in Skyrim has a life of its own. At any given moment, an angry sabre cat¹⁹ may pounce, seemingly out of nowhere, in a surprise attack. The howls of wolves are a warning that a pack of them are close by. As Skyrim is an extremely large province, the player might invest in a horse for travelling long distances and outrunning hostile creatures or enemies. The bodies of water in Skyrim also hold hidden dangers. While swimming or catching salmon, the player may be swarmed by slaughterfish, piranha-like creatures, whose scales, among many other collectable items in Skyrim, are useful in the concoction of potions.

Skyrim's game world is masterfully and meticulously rendered in incredible detail. Players can enter homes, pick up just about any object, talk to NPCs, overhear their conversations, chop wood for money, sell items and weapons, learn alchemy and spells, do some sword training or target practice, read in-game books on a variety of topics and perform a variety of other activities one might expect of an inhabitant of a medieval fantasy world. The game world even features a dynamic weather system. Movement from one location into another is not demarcated by a loading screen. All areas of the game world are accessible at all times during gaming play. There are no "intermissions" in *Skyrim*. The world of Skyrim seems to go on, regardless of the player-character's presence, strengthening the illusion that the player is participating in, and observing, a living, breathing world, which enhances the believability of the player's narrative experience. To revisit the metaphor of the theatre, the entire game world is a stage upon which action is continually occurring, regardless of whether the "audience" is there to see it or not. In *Fable: The Lost Chapters*, on the other hand, the

¹⁹ A fictional in-game creature that looks like a sabre-toothed tiger.

game design imposes restrictions that make for an interactive experience that is, at most, ostensible.

The game world of Albion in *Fable* features sixteen navigable locations in total, of which five are towns. The rest are peripheral areas in which key characters, side quests or treasures can be found. However, many of these areas are inaccessible early on in the game and can only be unlocked after specific missions of the main quest are completed. In other words, *Fable* is designed in a way that forces the player to follow a linear, scripted narrative. Even after unlocking certain areas, numerous loading screens disrupt the flow of navigation, like transitions between the scenes of a staged play. Despite being much smaller in size, Albion shares many characteristics with *Skyrim* such as a variety of terrain, bodies of water and hostile wildlife. *Fable*'s world is certainly aesthetically detailed, but interaction with the world's objects is limited to very few items in comparison with the multitude of objects that can be picked up, used, consumed and examined in *Skyrim*. The towns of Albion are populated with an assortment of NPCs who are going about their daily business. In both games, the player-characters do not have a speaking voice, but *Skyrim* provides a dialogue menu with several branches of conversation for every single NPC in the game world. In *Fable* however, interactions between the player-character and essential NPCs²⁰ are usually represented in an animated sequence and the game features no dialogue options for interaction with non-essential NPCs²¹ except for a limited set of actions called "Expressions." These allow the player to belch, giggle, flirt, roar and pass gas, to name just a few, in the presence of NPCs. The NPCs of Albion do not really converse or interact with one another, save for a few key moments in which overhearing a

²⁰ Non-player characters linked to the main quest or a side quest

²¹ Non-player characters that neither linked to the main quest, nor a side quest.

conversation is vital to plot progression. As a result, the game world of Albion appears incredibly static and unconvincing.

In “Clean Up on Aisle Six: Closing the Gap between Spectator and Performance in Uli Jaeckle’s *Discounter*,” Brian Rhinehart explores the use of space in the interactive, site-specific theatre of German director, Uli Jaeckle. Jaeckle’s theatre is influenced by the Live Art movement of the latter half of the 20th century. The fundamental tenet of the movement lies in the creation of an art object in front of a live audience in a particular space and time, in an attempt to lessen the distance between the artist and the spectators. In the case of performance art, the Live Art model attempts to forge an open relationship between actor and spectator through the elimination of pretence. Since “neither of them is pretending to be someone else...the act of communication [is] more truthful, more vulnerable, and more real” (155). Jaeckle’s focus, however, is on the creative use of space, which for him is the equivalent of a performer. “It has a contribution to make, something to say” (160). For his production of *Die Grosse Pause*, or *The Big Break*, Jaeckle set up interactive performance installations in the interior of an abandoned clock factory, “each one reflecting the experiences of the workers who spent so many years there (158). The audience walked around and explored these installations at will. They “could touch the materials, speak to the performers (many of whom were former employees of the factory) and generally engage with the performance itself.” This kind of experience is not unlike that of playing a video game in which a player can explore and interact with the space of the game world and the characters that inhabit that world. Because of the audience’s freedom to move around during Jaeckle’s productions the audience is able “to choose how, where, and from what distance they will experience the performance” (158).

Similarly, in *Skyrim*, the player is given the opportunity to make a multitude of choices that affect the narrative experience of the game.

During the dragon attack in the opening sequence of *Skyrim*, the player must choose who to follow out of the carnage to safety: Ralof, a member of the rebel Stormcloaks, a group the player knows absolutely nothing about at this early point in the game, or Hadvar, an Imperial soldier who showed sympathy for the player-character at Helgen, but also serves the Empire, which is responsible for ordering the player-character's execution to begin with. The player-character will either be led to the home of Hadvar's Uncle Alvor, or the home of Ralof's sister Gerdur, both in the town of Riverwood. Along the way, Hadvar will suggest that the player journey to Solitude to join the Imperial legion, and Ralof will suggest seeking out and joining the Stormcloaks. Joining one side or the other is the second main quest in *Skyrim*. Assuming the player chooses to follow Hadvar upon entering the house, the player is invited by Alvor's wife, Sigrid, to sit down for a meal while Alvor and his nephew converse. The player may choose to sit down and listen or walk around the house and pick up items while listening to the dialogue. Depending on which direction the player turns, the volume of the conversation is altered, becoming faint if the player ventures downstairs. On the lower level of Alvor's house, the player will meet Alvor's daughter, Dortha, and can opt to speak with her. The player can also choose to venture outside and speak to the other inhabitants of Riverwood. In the Riverwood Trader, a shop across the street, the player will intrude on an argument between a brother and sister, Luca and Camilla. If the player chooses to speak with them, they will reveal that bandits have stolen a Golden Claw, a very valuable item, from them. The player can choose to go in search of the Claw, or do something else entirely, such as forage for food

ingredients, collect herbs to make potions or hunt for animal furs and other items to craft into armor or weapons.

Remaining at the table with Alvor and Hadvar, however, will lead to the introduction of the second mission of the main quest, which must be completed in order for the player-character to be revealed as the last Dragonborn. After Hadvar tells him about the dragon attack, Alvor becomes worried and asks the player-character to travel to the city of Whiterun to ask Jarl Balgruff to send soldiers to protect Riverwood. A dialogue menu appears on which several conversation options are available.²² The player can ask for directions to Whiterun or where to acquire supplies for the journey there. Should the player ask about Jarl Balgruff, Alvor will answer that the Jarl has “managed to stay out of the war” and posits that he probably doesn’t like Ulfric or Elisif. Because of the conversation in the wagon during the opening sequence, the player already knows that Ulfric is the leader of the rebellion. Asking about Elisif will reveal the reason behind the civil war: Ulfric murdered Elisif’s husband, Jarl Torryg, by walking into his palace in Solitude and using the power of the Shout, which is considered a dishonourable act. Without speaking to Alvor, this information, which may or may not influence the player’s stance on the civil war, would not be uncovered until another point in the game. However, because of the high level of agency afforded by the game’s design, the player may opt to play the duration of the game without ever joining the Stormcloaks or the Imperial legion in much same way as the spectator choosing which of Jaecker’s performance installations to interact with. Space may not “have

²² Many of the other conversation options in the game are similar to the ones offered in this specific incident: Do you have any supplies I could take? / How do I get to Whiterun from here? / What can you tell me about the Jarl? / What can you tell me about Riverwood? / Can I use your forge? / What do you think about the war? Sometimes, one direction of questioning may lead to additional options. In the scene described above for example, if the player asks about the Jarl, Alvor will respond, “...” The player will be given the opportunity to ask, “Who is...” This exchange may continue until all possible branches of dialogue pre-scripted by game designers have been exhausted.

something to say” in *Skyrim* in the way that it supposedly does in Jaeckle’s site-specific theatre. However, the freedom of exploration and interaction that is afforded within the “spaces” of the world in *Skyrim* serves the same function that it does in the theatre, which is to shape and alter narrative experience.

Skyrim features over one hundred side quests while *Fable*, a much smaller game in terms of its digital size, offers thirty-three. One particular type of side quest that is prominently featured in many video games may be broadly categorized as the “fetch-quest,” which generally require the player to search for and retrieve specific items. To illustrate, at one point in the game, in a town called Bowerstone, the player encounters a little girl who asks the player-character to follow her. Following her leads the player-character to a tent where her mother is taking care of the little girl’s brother, Aldy, who is extremely sick. The mother explains that Aldy ate some poisonous mushrooms. She needs more of the mushrooms to take to a witch, who has promised to brew an antidote for Aldy. The mother asks the player-character to go find them while she takes care of her son. Her supposed desperation is completely unconvincing due, for the most part, to voice and intonation. Then, the player must find and speak to the witch in order to learn that there are four mushrooms to be found and that a specific merchant, located at a trader outpost outside of Bowerstone, may be in possession of them. Furthermore, the witch claims that Aldy’s condition is not at all serious and opines that “the little tyke’s probably having the time of his life.”

While this specific quest provides an opportunity for the player to explore the landscape of Albion, the substance – or lack thereof - of the quest is extremely problematic. First, the details that the witch imparts to the player-character is information that, logically, the mother should have had in the first place since she has

already been to see the witch. Second, once the trader in question is found, he tells the player, without provocation and for no apparent reason, that he sold three different people one mushroom each. After purchasing (or stealing) one available mushroom from the trader, the player must seek out the three other customers by navigating to three different areas in Albion. To acquire the mushrooms, the player must make a woman laugh three times using an “Expression” (or simply kill her and take her mushroom), deliver a love poem from a character named Cyril to a woman named Myra (or kill Cyril and take his mushroom) and go fishing in a pond. When the player returns to the witch with all four mushrooms, it is revealed that she has had the antidote all along. The combination of superficial interactions – in particular the initial conversation with the witch – and the absurd notion of fishing for a mushroom make the side quest to help the sick boy feel overly contrived which is only bolstered by the lack of any meaningful pay-off from the quest’s completion, since the boy is not in any danger to begin with. Completing the quest does allow the player to experience more of the “setting,” but it does not allow the player to learn anything new about the game world. As demonstrated in the examples from the first few scenes at the very beginning of *Skyrim*, even without a quest or specified objective, the slightest meaningful interaction within a single space in the game world will affect the narrative experience, however slightly. Space, then, is not the only contributing factor to narrativity in the video game.

D. The Men and Women Players: Avatars and Agency

In “On Immersive Theatre” (2012) Gareth White questions the validity of the term “immersive theatre” for productions that involve participatory performance.

According to White, productions such as Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, an interactive retelling of *Macbeth* in an abandoned school building, "provide ready-made exploratory landscapes, redolent of other histories, into which performances can be scattered, and in which engagement with the environment can be an important part of the audience experience" (223). Daniel and Sidney Homan compare the interactive experience of *Sleep No More* to the act of playing a video game, in particular the action-adventure thriller, *Heavy Rain* (2010). In the game, the player is put in control of four playable characters, one at a time. The narrative is presented in the form of several scenes, like chapters in a book. In order to progress through the game, the player must interact with objects and NPCs. The actions that a player performs and decisions that a player makes directly affect what happens later in the game, including the ending. It is not intense dramatic situations, the Homans argue, that are important to the player's overall narrative experience of gameplay, but rather the emphasis "on situations and actions that are common, everyday" because it is through these ordinary situations that "the main character is someone with whom the gamer, or anybody, can identify" (178). Being able to perform mundane actions such as "[b]rushing one's teeth or taking a shower . . . is crucial to establishing real emotional connections between the gamer and his onscreen representative" (179).

The player-characters in both *Fable* and *Skyrim* have the ability to eat, drink and sleep. In *Skyrim*, the consumption of food and drink may raise stamina, allowing the player-character to run for longer or restore magic points which allows for the casting of more spells. Sleeping can help to restore a character's health after a gruelling battle or aid in recovery after the contraction of an illness. However, the player can finish the game without ever having to consume a single item or take a single nap. Consuming

copious amounts of the alcohol that is available in abundance in *Skyrim*, will not affect the player-character's behaviour in any way. In *Fable*, food and drink have much the same functions as they do in *Skyrim*, but also affect the player-character physically. Eating too much will result in the player-character becoming fat. This is a superficial concern, however, as eating only vegetables and walking long distances for several minutes will eventually result in the weight being lost. Drinking too much alcohol will intoxicate the player-character, and movement will be slightly more difficult until the effect wears off. The player-character ages as time passes in the game and can begin to exhibit scars from being struck in battle, but again, these are cosmetic concerns that are easily reversible at the fountain of youth and by donating money to various shrines. In both *Skyrim* and *Fable*, mundane actions exist, but on their own, and because they are not a vital necessity, they do not help the player to relate to the player-character.

What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy (2003) by James Paul Gee is a defence of video game play as a new form of learning by virtue of the fact that "you cannot play a game if you cannot learn it" (6). Gee proposes that role-playing games involve three types of identities (54). The first is the virtual identity, or "one's identity as a virtual character in the virtual world." Second, there is the real-world identity – or that of the player (55). The third identity, Gee asserts, is the projective identity, or the player *as* the virtual character. This projective identity involves the interaction between the virtual and real world identities, which Zach Waggoner identifies as a liminal space, or the avatar, in *My Avatar, My Self* (2009). Waggoner uses the definition of avatar supplied by Laetitia Wilson:

[An avatar is] a virtual, surrogate self that acts as a stand in for our real-space selves, that represents the user. The cyberspace avatar functions as a locus that is multifarious and polymorphous, displaces from the facticity of our real-space

selves. . . . Avatar spaces indisputably involve choice in the creation of one's avatar; there is a substantial scope in which to exercise choice and create meaning [within the video game]

The element of choice is what separates avatars from agents, or predesigned player-characters such as Kratos in *God of War* and Manny Calavera in *Grim Fandango*.

There are very few customization options for the player-character in *Fable*. In addition, there is no option to change gender. On the one hand, this lack of choice makes sense, since the narrated main plot revolves around a young boy's journey to become a hero. Once the player-character grows old enough to leave the Guild of Heroes, the player may choose to buy tattoos and different hair and beard styles. Skill points may be used to raise attributes such as Physique, Health, Toughness, Speed, Accuracy, Guile and Will (magic power) which in turn unlock abilities like Steal and an assortment of spells. Furthermore, the player is never given an option to name the player-character, and even the world's inhabitants simply address him as "Hero". The lack of a name makes the player-character a non-entity, and as a result, there can be no virtual identity. In *Fable*, the only distinguishing feature of the Hero lies in the character's "Alignment," which is determined by the game's morality system. The more evil deeds the player performs during gameplay, such as killing traders instead of bandits, the more likely NPCs are to cower in fear or run screaming in the player-character's presence. The player-character's appearance will also slowly transform into a figure with red eyes, a pair of horns, black hair. Battle scars will also appear larger and deeper. On the other hand, if the player performs good deeds, such as aiding NPCs

via fetch-quests, the player-character will have blonde hair and blue eyes.²³ A halo will appear above the Hero's head and battle scars will fade significantly. NPCs will react by showering the player-character with praise and some female NPCs will become flirtatious. It is easy however, to switch "Alignments" by performing actions that are characteristic of the desired trait. In other words, killing a large number of bandits and monsters or paying a large sum of money at a holy shrine, will cancel out the murder of an innocent. Essentially, the player-character in *Fable*, is more characteristic of an agent, or pre-designed main character, than an avatar.

Skyrim seamlessly introduces the detailed character creation menu into the storyline at the beginning of the game. In the execution scene at Helgen, Hadvar does a roll-call from a ledger of prisoner's names from a list. When he has called out all the names on his list, he will address the player-character. "Wait. You there. Step forward. Who are you?" This is when the character creation menu appears. The player has the option to choose a race from a selection of ten, each with a special set of skills attributed to that race. Next, the player can choose the male or female gender. Appearance can also be customized in great detail, ranging from skin tone to facial features like the nose, mouth, cheekbones and jawline to hair and facial hair. Finally, the player must give the avatar a name.

The question that Hadvar poses right before the appearance of the character creation menu has more significance than one might think. Considering that the player is well within the first five minutes gameplay, how can the question of identity be answered? At such an early point in the game, with no back story like there is in *Fable*,

²³ This appears to be a consistent stereotype in the majority of games. In *Fable*, good is associated with fair hair and skin and blue eyes. The "Nords" of *Skyrim* are obviously of European descent and are also the only human race in the game.

Gee's notion of the projective identity comes into play. The projective identity is made up of two components – a projection of “one's values and desires onto the virtual character” and “seeing the virtual character as one's own project in the making...defined by my aspirations for what I want that character to be and become” (55). In addition to space then, the player's avatar also affects the narrative experience.

Gee describes video games as “semiotic domains” or, “a set of practices that recruits one or more modalities (e.g., oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artifacts, etc.) to communicate distinct types of meanings” (19). Because meaning changes relative to domain and situation, Gee asserts that one must actively “reflect (however unconsciously) on the situation and domain [one is] in” (26) in order for meaning to be understood. This can only be done by obtaining experience within a specific semiotic domain – in other words, becoming “literate” within that domain. In addition, Gee proposes two ways of looking at semiotic domains: “internally as a type of content or externally in terms of people engaged in a set of social practices.” Internally, the domain of the role-playing game of *Skyrim* is defined by several genres: epic fantasy, action, and adventure. Anyone who has ever read a fantasy novel or watched a fantasy film will also know that this domain will likely involve going on quests and the use of swords and crossbows to battle enemies in addition to other typical conventions of the genre. The avatar that the player creates will have an identity that is, in part, a projection of the player's identity as well as the player's aspirations for what the avatar will become in the context of an epic fantasy, action adventure RPG. In *Skyrim*, no personality or automated aesthetic changes based on the player's actions occur as they do in *Fable*. Instead, the player's in-game choices

and actions will often complement that projective identity and in turn, alter the narrative experience.

It must be duly noted that *Fable* is a much older game than *Skyrim* and the developers of *Fable* very likely faced technological limitations that the creators of *Skyrim* would not have encountered. However, the main reason for the juxtaposition of two games, which were created seven years apart, is to emphasize how restrictions – or lack thereof – on the scope of interactivity and agency directly can affect the narrative experience of gameplay.

Despite their fascination with the massive open-world, the multitude of things to do and the amount of agency they were afforded, players still had many complaints about *Skyrim*. Glass bottles did not shatter when they were thrown. There was not enough variety in terms of weapons and armor. The available hairstyles were aesthetically unappealing. When Bethesda finally released *Creation Kit* (2012), a software package with tools that enabled players to create custom content also known as modifications, or mods, players created modifications for the game that numbered in the thousands and posted the files online to be shared with other *Skyrim* players at no extra cost.²⁴ People who created the mod files would post them online to be shared for free. Obviously, many of these modifications affected the overall narrative experience.

Fable and *Skyrim* are different games, developed using different technologies in different time periods of video game evolution. *Fable* was created during a time when narrative, as opposed to aesthetic appearance or mechanics, was not a very

²⁴ Many of these modifications added ambient sounds, different weather, vegetation, items, craftable weapons and armor, dialogue options, and even quest lines to the game. Other mods are polished variations of elements that already existed in the original version of the game such as harsher climates, a better lighting. Other mods, such as ones that allow the player-character to feel hunger and thirst or make bodies of water look better, are aimed at realism or immersion.

important question in game development. Currently, however, the industry's focus has shifted. Developers are increasingly concerned with how to present narratives in a video game in a way that neither detracts from gameplay nor the narrative experience. For role-playing games at least, player agency and interaction within a well-constructed space is one factor to consider. Another factor is the presence of believable NPCs. In video games, all of these elements work together, like a seasoned theatre troupe, to allow the player to direct the narrative sequence. The player's most important responsibility lies in the creation of an avatar, the star of the show, because for the duration of gameplay, the narrative will be focused on that character's story.

CHAPTER 3 IN WHICH WORLDS ARE IMAGINED AND CREATED

A. Mask and Costume: Readers in Disguise

Walker Gibson distinguishes between two types of readers in “Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers” (1950), an essay that exemplifies what is perhaps one of the earliest attempts to evaluate the role of the reader in literary criticism. The “real” reader, Gibson asserts, is the “individual upon whose crossed knee rests the open volume” and the fictitious “mock reader,” “whose mask and costume the individual takes on in order to experience the language” (266). Applied to video games, Gibson’s real reader and mock reader are not altogether different from Gee’s notions of a player’s real-world identity and projective identity. In much the same way that Gibson’s mock reader assumes a persona “for the sake of the experience” based on “that set of attitudes and qualities which the language [of a text] asks us to assume” (265), the player comes to *Skyrim* with initial expectations that are based on known conventions of an epic fantasy, action RPG. In such a game, one preliminary assumption is that there will certainly be quests. Another is that one will surely be required to learn skills in magic and how to swing a sword or shoot arrows from a bow. In keeping with the tropes of the epic fantasy genre, one expects that one will have a large role in the game world’s central conflict in such a game. The player builds a virtual identity based on those pre-conceived expectations.

The similarity between reader and player activity does not mean that the difference between the “fixed” text of a book and the agency afforded to the player in *Skyrim* is not a significant one. In the case of a book, the literary experience is defined

by the text. For Gibson, a bad book “is a book in whose mock reader we discover a person we refuse to become, a mask we refuse to put on, a role we will not play” (268). In *Skyrim* on the other hand, the player’s virtual identity need only match the context of the game world. The development of that character as an avatar – the mask the player puts on and the role that the player will assume, in other words, Gee’s projective identity, is the result of the choices a player makes in-game. In the case of a text, the choices are already made and it is up to the reader to evaluate whether or not they are acceptable. “In the end,” Gibson contends, “our appeals for decisions of value are toward sanctions of society in a very real world” (269), and therefore, the question that Gibson’s reader asks – the same one the player asks throughout gameplay – is: “Who do I want to be?”

Louise M. Rosenblatt elaborates further on the role of the reader her in her seminal text of reader-response criticism, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. For Rosenblatt, as for Gibson, “[t]he finding of meanings involves both the author’s text and what the reader brings to it” (14). Reading is therefore a transactional event rather than a singular act, and involves “not only the past experience but also the present state and present interests or preoccupations of the reader” (20). Rosenblatt’s reader draws meaning from language – the verbal symbols within a text – by actively drawing on past and present experiences. “Each reader brings to the transaction not only a specific past life and literary history, not only a repertory of internalized ‘codes,’ but also a very active present, with all its preoccupations, anxieties, questions and aspirations” (144). For Wolfgang Iser, a text invites, and guides, this kind of participation by way of indeterminacy, or what he calls “gaps” within a text (*Prospecting* 8-13). In Iser’s view, a literary object is representative

of a multitude of what Roman Ingarden calls “schematized views” (8), or the presentation “of [a series of] reactions to and attitudes toward the world we live in” (7). The “gaps” lie in between the “schematized views” that are represented within the text. The “gaps,” in other words, are what the text does not say. During the act of reading, the reader fills in these gaps (12) using “his own experiences [and] subjective norms . . . [to] guide him through the text” (8). The reader then plays an active role in making meaning that is informed by his/her experience of the world in a process that is regulated by what is and is not in the text. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the player of a video game also plays a similar active role of interpreter during gameplay. Consider, for example, the narrative arc at Frostflow Lighthouse, a location in the gameworld that is so obscure that it is entirely possible for a player to never come across it, in which one of *Skyrim*'s miscellaneous quests takes place.

B. Playing Detective: Narrative Inferences and Game World Objects

Near the city of Winterhold, where the mage school known as the College of Winterhold resides, a player wandering the land of Skyrim chances upon the abandoned Frostflow Lighthouse. The player enters the lighthouse and walks in on a gruesome scene. In an eerily quiet front room, which has been torn apart, lies the unclothed body of a woman with an axe in her chest. It is a Falmer²⁵ axe, and a dead chaurus²⁶ lies by

²⁵The player will likely have come across the Falmer at some point during gameplay. In addition, in-game books which cover the history of Skyrim also reveal information about the Falmer race. If the player does not read them, then it is likely that she will not know any of the following information: The Falmer are a mutation of an ancient race known as the Snow Elves. After losing a war with the Nords they escaped persecution by going underground and sought protection with the Dwemer race of dwarves. The Dwemer, however, poisoned the Snow Elves, rendering them blind, and enslaved them. After years of servitude, they rose up against the Dwemer in a massive underground war, known as the War of the Crag. The war came to an abrupt end when, one day, the entire Dwemer race mysteriously vanished. The Falmer were left on their own, consumed by the urge to kill, and so they began to venture to the surface of Skyrim to satisfy their bloodlust.

the fireplace. It is apparent that something truly horrible has happened here. When the player approaches the woman's body, some text appears on the screen that signals the beginning of a side quest in which the player must find out who committed the murder. When the player examines the woman's body she discovers a journal belonging to a man named Habd. Flipping through the pages, the player discovers that Habd and his wife, Ramati, have finally managed to buy Frostflow Lighthouse in Skyrim after years of saving up money. They have moved into the lighthouse from the western province of Hammerfell, along with their children, a girl named Sudi and her brother, Mani. Habd is happy and at peace. A few more pages into the journal, however, Habd writes that Sudi and Mani are unhappy and fighting all the time. Household items are suddenly going missing. Sudi hears sounds in the basement every night, which Habd assumes are skeevers²⁷. He decides to go out and buy some traps to set in the basement. The final entry of Habd's journal is written after his return from this trip. He is horrified by the discovery of his wife's body and decides to go into the basement in the hopes that by doing so he can save the rest of his family.

A search of the rest of the lighthouse will uncover Sudi's and Ramati's journals and a letter from Mani to his sister. Reading all of these documents will allow the player to piece together a clearer picture of the inhabitants of the house. Ramati, for example, is both pleased that she and her husband have been able to buy their dream home in Skyrim and worried that "his age is creeping into his eyes." Her children do not want to live with them, particularly Mani, but her husband is aging and wants to be close to his

²⁶ A giant, poisonous insect-like creature. The player may or may not have come across a chaurus in her travels. As in the case of the Falmer, this information can also be found in the in-game books. Sometimes NPCs will also reveal information about the gameworld through dialogue.

²⁷ Over-sized rat-like creatures that carry disease. They are one of the first hostile creatures that a player will encounter at the beginning of the game.

children for a few more years. Mani believes his sister is lying about the scratching noises in the basement to prevent him from leaving home and is waiting for his father's return, after which he plans to set off into the world. Sudi, on the other hand, grows increasingly afraid and is frustrated about her fights with her brother.

The horror movie tropes in the plotline that are revealed by the in-game documents are likely to be familiar to the player – a family moves into a new home, strange events begin to occur in the home, one member of the family is disturbed by these occurrences, but nobody takes that person seriously and, as a result, tragedy ensues. The journals and letter also invoke real-world experiences. The player likely recognizes the old couple in retirement who are looking for peace and tranquillity. The player also recognizes the nuclear family of Habd, Ramati, Sudi and Mani and the child who wants to leave that family unit and set off into the world to seek his or her fortune. All the fictional characters in the narrative of Frostflow Lighthouse express emotions and have a history that is conveyed, however briefly, by the journal entries and Mani's letter. These in-game objects, which are a record of the characters' observations and emotions, allow the player to make inferences by which the player can relate to those characters. James Paul Gee, writing about notes, diaries and dialogue in the action RPG *Deus Ex*, asserts that “[t]o make sense of them, you [the player] must [actively] fit them into the emerging plot and virtual world you are discovering and helping to build” (85).

Many other in-game objects – which do not require the sort of reading in the literal sense that the journals and letters do – allow the player to make narrative inferences and in-game decisions based on those inferences. The disarray in the front room of the lighthouse, evidenced by the broken tables and chairs and the household objects scattered about, suggest an intense struggle. The state of the house, coupled with

the carcass of the chaurus near the fireplace and scratching noises coming from the next room keeps the player alert to the possible presence of other hostile creatures. The player may decide at this point in the game to check the avatar's inventory to make certain that he/she is carrying an adequate number of arrows, or has the right sword equipped.²⁸ The axe in Ramati's body in the front room of the lighthouse, is indicated by a dialogue box as being a Falmer axe, which betrays the culprit of the crime. Many players of *Skyrim* are likely to agree that the Falmer as rendered are the most terrifying and tenacious foes that a Dragonborn can come across in the land of Tamriel. The player may decide to leave and seek ways to build up the avatar's fighting skills²⁹ in other areas of the game world before attempting to explore other areas of the lighthouse. On the other hand, a player with an avatar at a lower skill level who possesses potions of healing and high-level, destructive spells, may decide to venture forward.

Upon entering the basement, the player discovers a cave system. The missing household objects are dispersed throughout the caves. There is a bloody altar beside which lies the body of Mani, suggesting that he was killed in some kind of sacrifice. Dispersed throughout the caves are tents and other structures, which imply that

²⁸ During gameplay, many players adopt a weapon of choice based on playing style, which is influenced by what James Paul Gee calls the player's "projective identity". Others find that certain weapons are more convenient for disposing of certain types of enemies in specific situations. For example, in a confined space like the lighthouse, a player will likely find that it is easier to use a sword than to shoot arrows from a bow. Others, who have developed their player-character's skill levels to a high enough point and who prefer to use stealth attacks, may cast a spell for temporary invisibility and sneak around the house with a dagger.

²⁹ In *Skyrim*, an avatar's skill level rises in proportion to the frequency that an action attributed to that skill is performed. For example, picking locks will raise the avatar's lock picking skills. Every time a skill level increases, skill points are gained which the player may distribute across various skills of her choosing to gain what are known as "perks," or additional attributes for that skill. A "perk" that might be gained for the lock-picking skill for example, is Night Thief, which increases the likelihood that pickpocketing a sleeping target will be successful. In addition, as an avatar gains skill levels, that avatar also accumulates experience levels. Every time the experience level increases, a player is given the opportunity to choose to increase a specific characteristic of that avatar: Health, enabling the avatar to take more enemy hits during fights; Magicka, allowing spells that are cast to last longer; or Stamina, allowing the avatar to carry more items and run for a longer duration.

whatever made the noises that Sudi heard in the basement have been living in the cave system for some time. The player may decide, due to the environment of cave system and the possibility that there may be more enemies, to change weapons again. Deeper within the cave system lies Sudi's body. A note on her body reveals that at some point she and her father crossed paths, at which point he gave her a knife, but that he was quickly captured and taken away. The note indicates that Habd seemed to be very sick as well. The fact that Sudi met with her father suggests that her captors kept her alive for some unknown purpose, and she likely took her own life after her father was captured, suggested by the knife in her hand. In addition, Sudi's mention of her father's illness suggests that finding Habd alive is highly unlikely.

In *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (1972), Iser asserts that "the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the esthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the esthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader" (274). In the case of an open-world RPG like *Skyrim* then, the "text" of the game – the game world, the in-game objects, the main quests, the side quests, the scripted narrative, the degree of agency and the variety of choices possible – is created by the designer. The narrative experience, however, is realized by the player during gameplay. In *Skyrim*, the journal entries and letters that inform the player's knowledge of the characters involved in the narrative events that take place at Frostflow Lighthouse; knowledge about the Falmer that the player accumulates during gameplay (by way of previous encounters with the Falmer, reading the many tomes dispersed throughout the game world, and/or interaction with NPCs); the "staged" setting of the lighthouse and basement; and the player's preconceived expectations for an epic fantasy RPG, all contribute to the player's overall

narrative experience during gameplay. The player is also constantly filling in the narrative gaps and acting as interpreter, a role that reader-response theorists ascribe to the reader of a text. It is through the interpretation of a narrative event and the possible reactions of the player's projective identity to such that event, that a player is able to make informed decisions about how to proceed next in the game. One may logically ask, however, what determines the narrative experience in narrative games that are not open-world in the way that *Skyrim* is and in which the player's agency is limited in scope?

C. Meaningful Decisions: Consequences of Choice

This War of Mine (2014) is a single-player, war-themed, independent video game developed by 11 Bit Studios and is inspired by past conflicts in Warsaw during World War II, Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 90s, as well as the current, ongoing war in Syria.³⁰ Most war-themed games, such as the *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* series – in which the player assumes the role of a soldier on the side of the “good guys” – revolve around the goal of eliminating “the enemy.” *This War of Mine* (*TWOM*), however, puts the player in control of a group of civilians who seek shelter in an abandoned house during a wartime siege of the fictional city of Pogoren, Ulraznavia.³¹ The location is plausibly somewhere in Eastern Europe, but the game world is graphically rendered as a

³⁰ The game's developers reveal this in an interview with Dan Crawley for VentureBeat.com "War Is Hell: How This War of Mine Drew on Real-life Survivors For inspiration." VentureBeat. N.p., 19 Nov. 2014. Web. 20 Apr. 2015.

³¹ *This War of Mine* would essentially be considered a strategy game. However, the player makes decisions on behalf of every single character he/she is put in control of and the player's choices have consequences that affect the overall narrative and can, under the categorization of the term in this thesis, be considered a narrative role-playing game.

two-dimensional, generic-looking city, using various shades of grey. The “enemy” is other civilians as well as militant forces.

There are a total of twelve playable characters in *TWOM*, each with his or her own personality, moral values and background. The player begins the game with a minimum of three characters, which are randomized at the start of every new game session. The game world is restricted to twenty different buildings (among them a supermarket, a hospital, a construction site and several houses) that are marked on an in-game map. To travel to a specific location, the player must select it on the map, but not all the areas are always accessible. Under the guise that there is heavy fighting going on in that area, access is randomly restricted during gameplay. The player may travel to these locations under cover of darkness at night, which lasts ten in-game hours (five minutes in real time), and only if there are no reports of fighting in or around the area. There are a limited set of actions that the player can choose to perform such as rummaging through garbage, boxes and crates for items, unlocking doors, digging through debris, crafting items, cooking, eating and sleeping. While the player does not assume the role of one specific character in *TWOM*, the player does control the actions of several player-characters in the game. However, the player cannot control the things they say, nor do any of the player-characters or NPCs have voices. Any dialogue in the game, whether in the form of a private thought or a conversation taking place between the player-characters, NPCs or both, appears as text above the character speaking. There are also a number of actions that the player-characters perform without interference on the player’s part, such as smoking or reading books. As the following analysis will show, in *TWOM*, there is no “hero” and while the game does end, it cannot be “won” in

the literal sense. The narrative is one of survival – winter is coming, and the player’s goal is to make sure that the player-characters will survive the siege.³²

TWOM begins with the same three characters for every player the very first time the game is loaded. Their photos appear on the screen, followed by some text that provides the player with narrative context:

When the civil war broke out, many people thought it would only last a couple of weeks. It’s been years since the government military surrounded the rebels in the capital, cutting off all supply lines. The civilian population trapped in the city are suffering from hunger, disease and shelling.

Katia met both Pavle and Bruno before the war. She used to be a reporter, while Bruno had his own television cooking show. Pavle was the star of the local football team. Katia even interview him once. Now they meet in dramatically different circumstances, looking for food and shelter.

When the game begins (Day 1), a cross section of the abandoned house appears, showing the player-characters inside. Dispersed through various rooms are piles of rubble, dressers and cabinets that the player can sort through for usable items. At the bottom right corner of the screen are photos of the player-characters, which serve as notecards that display the selected character’s name, a skill he or she is good at, and information about his or her physical and emotional state. Bruno’s photo, for example, shows that he is a “good cook” and that he is a “smoker.” Nowhere in the game is the significance of the player-characters’ skills or vices explained. An attentive player, however, will notice in the course of gameplay that less fuel and water are consumed if Bruno is doing the cooking. He begins to complain (via text in a speech bubble) that he hasn’t had a cigarette in a very long time. The more complex elements of the player-characters’ personalities are not listed anywhere in-game either, but they can be inferred

³² The number of in-game days this will take is also randomized by the game.

from how the characters react to in-game events – the bulk of which occur during the night time.

The player is limited to choosing only one player-character to do the scavenging when night falls. The player can then assign a task to each of the remaining characters, such as sleep or guard duty. Bruno can carry fewer items in his backpack than Katia or Pavle can. Pavle's photo indicates that he is a fast runner, and so it is more likely that a player will select Pavle to go scavenging. Should the player lead Pavle into a situation where he must run from danger, escape is more likely to be successful with a player-character that can run quickly. One of the first tasks the player may wish to attend to is the acquisition of food. Unlike in the unmodified, or unmodded, version of *Skyrim*, where eating is a possible action but not a required one, it is imperative that the player-characters in *TWOM* find food. Eating uncooked food may cause the player-characters to become ill, but to cook the food, the player must first find enough materials to craft a makeshift stove. The player must also have an adequate supply of water and items to burn as fuel. The supermarket would seem to be the obvious choice for finding food supplies.

When the player sends Pavle to the supermarket, one of two events may occur. Pavle may encounter three armed civilians who are also scavenging there, in which case the player must make sure that Pavle acquires all the necessary items before they do. If Pavle enters the supermarket while armed, however, the scavengers will shoot at him. The second event that may occur involves more of a moral choice on the player's part. A woman is in the next room scavenging for food when she is approached by a soldier. He offers to give her food in exchange for sex. She refuses and pleads with him to let her go free. If the player chooses to do nothing, then the soldier will force her to go out

the back door of the supermarket and rape her. Should the player choose to send Pavle in to help the woman, however, it is highly possible – especially if he is unarmed – that the soldier will use the assault rifle he carries to kill Pavle. If Pavle dies, Katia and Bruno will express their sadness, again via speech bubble, and will sometimes cover their faces with their hands and cry. In addition, when a character is sad, his or her emotional status appears on his or her photo. If the character remains sad for a long time, it is possible for him or her to become depressed which is indicated by a symbol that appears over that character’s head. A player will not be able to interact with a character that is depressed with the exception of sending another character to “talk” to him or her. A player-character who is depressed may eventually commit suicide, which will also have an effect on the remaining player-characters. However, if the player chooses to for Pavle to run away from the situation at the supermarket, he, Katia and Bruno will still be emotionally affected by the situation. Katia, for example, will express her horror. Pavle will express feelings of guilt. Bruno will question the state of the world. None of the player-characters’ reactions to in-game events are ever communicated by voice. Players must interpret the character’s gestures and remain alert to the textual clues in their speech bubbles.

Not all of the events that occur in *TWOM* affect the characters negatively. In the above occurrence, an armed Pavle could certainly save the woman, which would boost morale for all three player-characters. Other random events that require the player to make difficult choices may also occur during gameplay – neighbours come knocking at the door to ask for help, and other survivors appear seeking refuge in the home – all of which will affect the player-characters emotionally. The player’s decisions can also affect the player-characters’ physical well-being. Who will be the one to get the only

available meal when everyone is starving and food is scarce? Should all of the supplies that have been collected be traded for the medicine that will save one sick member of the group? With every choice that the player makes, the state of the game world is altered somehow and so, too, is the narrative experience. Consider, for example, the experience of Jesse Sell at the MIT Game Lab who, during one playthrough of *TWOM*, entered the house of an old couple and killed a defenceless old man:

In the morning when I returned to the stronghold my character had changed. He was wracked with guilt. Unable to believe what he had done, he slipped into depression. The mood of the whole group blackened quickly. The next evening, I sent another member of a group back to the house since I wasn't able to loot everything the night before. When I got there, I found the old woman dead. Without her husband and without the food I stole the night before, she wasn't able to survive. I hadn't expected that. I just assumed everything would carry on in her little video game world. I had killed two people over a day's worth of food. My group had slipped into crippling depression and soon couldn't survive any more. I never meant to hurt anyone. I thought I could be the hero. ("Emotion and Play")

According to Iser, "[literature] simulates life, not in order to portray it, but in order to allow the reader to share in it" (29). Iser's reader is always safe in the "virtual" world of the text, "where he can experience extremes of pleasure and pain without being involved in any consequences whatsoever." Gee makes a similar claim about the player of a video game, relating the game world to Erik Erickson's concept of "*psychosocial moratorium*," or "a learning space in which the learner can take risks where real-world consequences are lowered" (62). In *Skyrim*, for example, a player can save and reload that saved file any number of times, allowing the player to try different actions and choices without consequence. Players can alter the difficulty level of the game at the beginning, making enemies easier to eliminate in battle. The save feature and the

alternate difficulty settings are present in most games. In *TWOM*, however, there is neither a save feature nor can the player alter settings to make gameplay easier.

Obviously, the player is never really physically at risk while playing *TWOM*. The player-characters, however, are entirely at the mercy of the player's decisions. The game autosaves the player's progress at the dawn of each new in-game day, so whatever events have occurred during the previous night cycle cannot be altered. If a player-character or NPC dies, that character remains dead for the duration of that particular playthrough. *TWOM* does not offer the player choice in the moral sense of good and evil. The player's decisions have consequences which alter the narrative experience in a permanent way because the player does not have the option of reloading a saved game. In addition, the fact that the game is designed in such a way that player-characters, accessible locations, and in-game events at the start of each playthrough are randomly selected means that the player essentially cannot recreate the same narrative experience twice. *TWOM* does not provide the player with an expansive game world to explore. There is no avatar to customize and project onto, nor are "side quests" with different narrative arcs to choose from or dialogue options for interacting with NPCs. However, the game does provide enough information for an attentive player to make narrative inferences about the player-characters. In addition, the simulation of wartime difficulties that a civilian population would likely face – the scarcity of supplies, the exorbitant value of food, the fights that occur between player-characters that are starving to death – is not a factor that the player is in control of. As Jesse Sell learned during his playthrough of *TWOM*, the player cannot be "the hero" in this game. The player must, as in real-life, wait out the war. During this time, there is the possibility that none of the player-characters will survive, in which case, the game will end. Even if

some or all of the player-characters do manage to stay alive until the siege is lifted, the game does not end without consequences to the player-characters. The player must make inference about the player-characters by paying attention to their gestures, their speech bubbles and the little information that their photographs provide. The player, however, knows virtually nothing about them at the very beginning of the game. It is only when the characters react to in-game events that the player discovers something about them. While the events are randomly triggered by the game, the player is responsible for choosing how to react to the event. Once the player makes a decision, it cannot be reversed. Choices then, are meaningful in *TWOM*, because they matter in the overall narrative context.

D. Creating Worlds: Player Agency and Authorship

Narrative experience in video games like *Skyrim* and *TWOM*, in which gameplay tangentially revolves around a central narrative, is realized by a series of actions that are meaningful. Meaning is situation-specific and determined by space, dialogue, character, and the scope of in-game agency that the player is provided with. During gameplay, the player interprets all the determinants of meaning within a given situation in order to make in-game decisions, a process by which the narrative experience is dramatized in a (relatively) complex manner. In terms of reader-response theory, the “mask” and “costume” that the player dons within the game world in addition to the repertory of real-world and in-game experiences that the player brings to that world are the components with which the player fills in the “gaps” or interprets and produces meaning (gameplay). In much the same way that a reader’s interpretation of a text is situated within the confines of that particular text, meaning in video games is

situated within the game world of which the player is a part, a phenomenon that is similar to what Mikhail Bakhtin, in his study of the literary carnivalesque, calls ‘second life’ (*Rabelais and His World* 12).

In *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Bakhtin identifies several characteristics of carnival as an ideological construct rooted in pre-Renaissance folk culture: the ritual spectacle. It is not, however, “a spectacle that is seen” by the participants of the ritual (7), but rather a second world that they live in. During carnival, the social hierarchies prevalent in everyday life are dissolved and the limitations imposed by the dominant system of “rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” are transcended (10). During the Renaissance era, this “temporary suspension . . . led to the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture . . . [a] new type of communication” that was “liberated from norms of etiquette and decency,” unique to carnival and otherwise, “impossible in every day life” (10-6). For Bakhtin, the absence of the dominant “forms of . . . coercive socioeconomic and political organization” (255) during carnival does not mean, however, that there are no rules. In fact, the second world of carnival, like a world in a video game, has its own distinct rules. Carnival, Bakhtin asserts, is organized in “the way of the people,” and “shaped according to a certain pattern of play” (255, 10). Like Gibson’s reader who wears a mask and costume in order to participate in the world of a text, during carnival, the “individual body ceases to be itself” as the exchange or renewal of bodies becomes possible “through change of costume and mask” (255). It is through this process that the individual participant of carnival becomes a part of the collective in a second life. Similarly, the video game player who assumes a role within a game world participates in a second life that is governed by the rules of that specific world. This phenomenon is especially evident in online multiplayer video games.

Minecraft (Mojang 2009) is a “sandbox”³³ style game that incorporates RPG elements into its gameplay. The player has the option to choose between five different game modes, the details of which will be discussed later in this chapter. The five game modes are: Survival, Hardcore, Creative, Multiplayer and Realms. The game world is made up of vast expanses of terrestrial biomes, or ecosystems, which are procedurally generated.³⁴ The world is rendered in three dimensional and rather simple pixelated graphics. As of the *Minecraft*’s latest update (Version 1.8.3), there are a total of sixteen different biomes that make up the game world – which is so expansive that a player would have to spend an inordinate amount of time trying to reach “the end of the world,” as evidenced by one *Minecraft* player’s attempt to do so, beginning in 2011:

“Nearly three years later, Mac, who is now thirty-one, is still walking. He has trekked more than seven hundred virtual kilometres in a hundred and eighty hours. At his current pace, Mac will not reach the edge of the world, which is now nearly twelve thousand kilometres away, for another twenty-two years.” (Parkin “Journey to the End of the World”)

Simon Parkin of *The New Yorker* adeptly describes *Minecraft* as a game that “is primarily . . . about human expression: a giant, Lego-style construction set in which every object can be broken down into its constituent elements and rebuilt” into just about any structure one is able to imagine (“Journey”). The game world is separated into three in-game dimensions: “The Overworld,” which is the surface world made up

³³ A “sandbox” style video game is one in which very few gameplay limitations are placed on the player. *Skyrim* may be considered a “sandbox” style game owing to the freedom the player has to move around the game world and the player’s active control over the game’s narrative progression. *Minecraft*, however, is a true “sandbox” style game in the sense that the game world is a virtual playground in which the player has the freedom of creation.

³⁴ A game world that is procedurally generated refers to content that is generated by a computer algorithm. In the case of a game like *Skyrim*, the game world is manually generated, which means game designers manually rendered the in-game graphics (including artwork and in-game objects such as trees, grass, crates, barrels, shops, inns, houses, NPCs, etc.) prior to the game’s distribution. In *Minecraft*, the computer on which the game is installed generates the game world using an algorithm that is pre-configured by the game’s programmers.

of different ecosystems such as “Jungle,” “Mesa,” “Desert,” “Ocean” and “Tundra,” among several others; “The Nether,” which was previously known as “Hell” and may only be accessed through a specially built portal; and finally, “The Enderworld,” a single floating island within a dark void, previously known as “Sky,” and which may only be accessed via a hidden portal located somewhere within the game world. One does not need to be astute to note the overt symbolism of the three world dimensions in *Minecraft* as containing a heaven and a hell, with a mortal world in between. In addition, the fact that the player-character, also made up of blocks, is male with the generic name of “Steve,” and that one of the first food items that a player is likely to find early on in the game is an apple, is rather curious in light of *Minecraft*’s narrative of man versus nature. The player-character is negligible as a physical entity within the game world because *Minecraft* is played in the first-person perspective – allowing for the illusion that the player is viewing the world through the player-character’s eyes.

“Survival” mode in *Minecraft* is a single-player mode in which the player’s goal is to survive in the wilderness. After selecting several options for game world generation from a menu and giving that world a name, the player-character is then “spawned” at a random location within a randomly generated game world. For every new game that is played, the player must create a brand new world. An identical world can only be recreated if the reference number for that world (known as a “seed” in-game) is entered into the world generation menu. In fact, players who find a particular game world appealing, due to characteristics such as the abundance of certain resources or an aesthetic landscape feature, often post these reference numbers on online forums created specifically for the sharing of game worlds. The basics of gameplay in *Minecraft* involve gathering resources and crafting items. In the “Jungle” biome for

example, players can collect blocks of “Junglewood” by cutting down trees. Iron blocks mined underneath the surface of the game world can be tempered into iron bars that can, in turn, be crafted into tools, such as a pickaxe or garden shears. As the player-character is “spawned” with an empty inventory at the beginning of the game, it is up to the player to decide what activities to undertake first. Often, players begin by building a makeshift shelter. Other players forage for food. Many opt to gather resources and create tools that will make acquiring other resources much more efficient. The resources available to the player are dependent on the biome in which the player-character is “spawned.” A player who is in search of wood for crafting torches will not find a source of wood in the “Desert” biome. The player may choose to walk across the landscape until a wood-rich biome is reached, such as the “Forest,” or remain in the “Desert” and perform another task instead. The player’s decisions on how to proceed are directly affected by the player-character’s surroundings.

Minecraft features a day and night cycle with one in-game day being a total of 20 minutes long in real-time. In “Survival” mode, the player-character faces several dangers during the night cycle (ten minutes in real-time). These exist in the form of hostile NPCs (also called “mobs”) which include archer Skeletons, exploding Creepers, and tall, shadowy figures known as Endermen. A player who has managed to keep the player-character alive long enough to have accumulated the resources to craft a sword and armor can fend off most hostile NPCs. Aside from hostile creatures, however, the player-character can be harmed in a variety of other ways such as falling from cliff or the top of a tree, accidentally digging into a hidden lava pool underground or drowning in bodies of water. Death is not permanent in *Minecraft*’s “Survival” mode as it is in *This War of Mine*, nor can the player-character starve to death. However, if the player-

character reaches the point of starvation, then the player-character will lose health points and be more susceptible to death from a serious fall or NPC attack. Dying in *Minecraft* is not without consequences. Immediately after death, the player-character is “respawned” in the same location as the original “spawning” at the beginning of the game. This means that if a player has built shelter at a different location from the original “spawning,” the player must go in search of his or her shelter after dying. Due to the sheer size of the game world, this can be a frustrating and difficult task as there is no in-game map. However, even if the player has managed to craft a map, all items in the player-character’s inventory are lost upon death. The only way for the player to reclaim them is to navigate to the location in the game world where the player-character died.

Despite the possibility of death in “Survival” mode, gameplay in *Minecraft* never ends. There is no terminal narrative sequence to complete and without NPC interaction, save the possibility of trading with villagers, gameplay in *Minecraft*’s “Survival” mode will inevitably become redundant.³⁵ “Hardcore” mode is very much like “Survival” mode, but the hostile NPCs are much stronger and more abundant, the player-character can starve to death and, finally, the player-character will not “respawn” after death and the game world will be deleted. In “Creative” mode, which is also single-player, there are no dangers to the player-character. The hostile mobs exist, but the player-character can never be harmed. “Creative” mode provides the player with an unlimited amount of every resource that is available in the game. The player-character is given the ability to fly and the player can build, explore and transform the game world at will. In light of the tripartite structure of the game world, the existence of a

³⁵ Villages are extremely difficult to find in *Minecraft*. Many *Minecraft* game worlds are also generated without villages.

lone, male player-character in a world that is virtually unpopulated and the apple as one of the initial food items available, it becomes difficult to ignore that “Creative” mode essentially allows the player to play a god-like entity despite the fact that player has little control in the creation of the algorithmically generated world.³⁶ Incidentally, the power to create and the freedom of creativity provided by the game’s developers becomes most apparent in *Minecraft*’s “Multiplayer” and “Realms” modes.

The “Multiplayer” and “Realms” modes in *Minecraft* are essentially the same. The “Multiplayer” mode allows players to connect to game worlds created by other players that are hosted on private servers – in other words, player hosted servers. The “Realms” mode allows players to purchase a subscription to a server hosted by the developers themselves (Mojang), on which they can easily create game worlds that other players can join. In these online game worlds, numerous activities take place. In fact there are so many user-created worlds that it is virtually impossible for a player not to be able to find one that suits his/her preferences. Some servers provide arenas in which players or groups of players within common factions fight wars. Others provide a game world in which players compete to build the most creative structures. In-game chat features allow players to communicate with one another. Many have rules which members of the group within that game world must follow. In each and every one of these game worlds, players are essentially participating in a Bakhtinian carnival of sorts,³⁷ a second life which exists apart from the players’ real-world of every day life, as part of various fully-fledged virtual societies, or what game designer Celia Pearce terms “communities of play.”

³⁶ That the player can create living creatures called “Golems” in both “Survival” and “Creative” mode should also be noted.

³⁷ Bakhtin’s carnival juxtaposes religious and spiritual elements with the grotesque and profane. These are not elements found in *Minecraft*’s community of play.

In *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds* (2009), Pearce provides an in-depth account of “an eighteen-month ethnographic study of the Gathering of Uru, a “neighbourhood” of the online game *Uru*” (69), in an attempt to determine how game design affects emergent social behaviour within massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) and massively multiplayer online worlds (MMOWs).³⁸ Pearce characterizes the MMOW as a “virtual world, or metaverse, whose denizens play a part in actually shaping the world” (6). The players within the world of a *Minecraft* server do shape the game world in a physical sense – mountains can be formed, valleys can be dug, thematically designed buildings can be erected – using the resources provided by the game. Furthermore, as in the case of *Skyrim*, a variety of software tools are freely available to those *Minecraft* enthusiasts who wish to create additional content, modifications, or mods for the game. The number of mods that have been created – which range from new graphics textures that make the landscape look more realistic to cooking recipes for oatmeal to changes to the player-character’s appearance³⁹ to additional biomes full of giant flowers and quests to save a fairy queen – are innumerable. While mods are often used to enhance gameplay experience in the single-player modes of *Minecraft*, they are especially interesting when used to build and enhance MMOWs. In addition to content creation, these virtual worlds also have their own rules, which:

“take the form of player constraints, as well as the world’s properties – its physics; its cosmology, or world view and values; its “karma system,” or

³⁸ Essentially, MMOGs and MMOWs are both virtual worlds, which Pearce also calls “metaverses” (6). However, MMOGs are video games with rules for gameplay. For example, one subcategory of MMOGs are MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games), such as *The Lord of the Rings Online* in which players participate in a fixed game world based on J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth. Main quests, which drive the central narrative’s progression, are provided episodically. Player interactions with the game world and with other players, allow for variations in narrative experience.

³⁹ These are known as character “skins.” A huge variety of player-character skins currently exist which alters the gender, physical appearance and costume of the original male player-character, Steve.

causal structure; its feedback systems, including rewards and penalties; its communication mechanisms and interfaces; its economic structure and transaction mechanisms; even its allowable modes of transportation.” (Pearce 29)

Much like the world of carnival which, as Bakhtin asserts, is organized by the people, the game world of a *Minecraft* MMOW is organized by the players who build it.⁴⁰

One particularly interesting example of a player-built *Minecraft* game world with a rather complex society, is the Isle of Gildorym, which is hosted by a whole team of players and is closely based on, *Dungeons & Dragons*. In fact, according to Gildorym’s official website, the Isle of Gildorym is located on the *D&D* continent of Faerun. Other elements the community has appropriated from *D&D* are the Faerunian calendar as well as the various deities, each one with a distinct moral alignment. The player may choose to follow one deity or a mixture of several. There are a total of seven playable races for the player to choose from, as well as a variety of character classes, all of which are common to the *D&D* model. All races and classes are described in great detail on Gildorym’s official website. It is perhaps noteworthy to mention here that while in *Skyrim* the playable human race is identified as the fair-haired and fair-skinned “Nords,” in Gildorym, they are categorized as “Human,” and may be “[h]ardy or fine, light-skinned or dark, showy or austere, primitive or civilized, devout or impious” (“Races”). A player-character of mixed race, such as a half-human half-elf, is also a possibility in Gildorym, which is not offered in *Skyrim*.

Once they become a part of the community, players can build their own homes outside of town, or rent homes owned by other players. Every member of Gildorym

⁴⁰ In this situation, the player is like Iser’s reader, who creates the “aesthetic” text from an author’s “artistic” text in the process of reading. The player’s creative option in *Minecraft* are near limitless, allowing her to build her own world and act as “director” of her own narrative experience.

may assume a role (or several) in the community, ranging from farmer to innkeeper to becoming a member of the city guard. The death of a player-character is a real possibility. Killing an innocent can result in execution. A player who continually terrorizes others can expect that someone will eventually take revenge. If a player-character dies, then the player will have to create a completely new one. Players can also die during adventures and events which are organized daily by community members known as Dungeon Masters (DMs).⁴¹ For example, during one catastrophic event, a fire burned down the magnificent city of Maer Dauldon in Gildorym. Community members fled the city, many losing all their belongings. While some members chose to inhabit new towns, others banded together to build brand new cities, a process that took several weeks of collaborative building and planning efforts. During another event, a valuable jewel was stolen from a stronghold. Members formed small teams and set out to find the culprits.

A player in the community of Gildorym lives a second life, one in a virtual world in which the community is organized around a set of rules for play that are mutually agreed upon. Gildorym is ultimately a *D&D*-style game and the official website provides an extensive overview of the rules for participation. There are distinct rules, for example, concerning communication and interaction with other players in Gildorym. Besides a set of keyboard commands for types of communication such as shouting or whispering, all players must remain “in character” at all times. The “New Player Guide” advises players to “[r]oleplay [sic] out every action. If you’re going to

⁴¹ In *D&D*, the Dungeon Master (DM) is usually a single person who creates the world setting of a game session and adventures that are to take place within that world. In situations where there is disagreement about the game rules, the DM is the final arbiter (*Dungeons and Dragons Core Rulebook II v.3.5: Dungeon Master’s Handbook 5*). At the time of writing, the Gildorym website announced that a DM position was open to applicants.

give someone money then type *holds out a hand with several coins* (or something similar) and wait for them to take it from you.” Narrative experience in the world of Gildorym is also reliant on interactions with other players.

Becoming a member of the community of Gildorym in the first place involves a great deal of role-play even before the player is allowed to enter the world. First, the interested party must fill out an online application on Gildorym’s official website. The application consists of two sections, one with very general questions about the player’s *Minecraft* account and real-life age. The second part of the application, however, is far more demanding, with questions posed in narrative form, for the purpose of role-play:

As the “Salty Sealion” cuts through the waves and the cool ocean breeze blows across your face, you see the other passengers lining up before the feast room. When, suddenly, a rather awkwardly dressed deckhand moves in front of you blocking your path. He gives a rather cheeky grin and tilts his head slightly before speaking ”What’re yeh not going ta introduce yourself? (Name) The name is Edmund.” He holds out a rather grimy hand and looks to you again awaiting a reply. (“Application Layout and Guide”)

Answers to the questions about race, fictional age, personal history, reasons for moving to Gildorym, occupation and skills must also follow in the same form, as indicated by the sample answer provided in the application guide:

blinking a few times out of nervousness ‘Name is Clair, Clair Heartbone Sir.’ *awkwardly looking down to Edmund’s hand, she hides her hands behind her back*

An application to any group or institution is fundamentally a tool for the process of selection. The application to Gildorym, however, serves another function that is of great importance for role-play, one which is effected in the form of an in-game menu in *Skyrim*: character creation.

In *Skyrim*, the only aspects of identity the player has at the time of character creation are physical attributes and a name. The player-character has no background story, not even one that explains how or why the player-character has come to be captured. The player's avatar, the projective identity, only comes into being through gameplay. On the other hand, the applicant to the community of Gildorym is *forced* to answer questions as his/her avatar would answer them. In the example above for instance, we learn that Clair Heartbone is perhaps easily unsettled in social contexts. Clair Heartbone is already someone. Essentially, all of the questions on the online application to Gildorym can be incorporated into the one question that Hadvar asks the player-character at Helgen in the first few minutes of *Skyrim*: "Who are you?"

The narrative experience of play within the virtual world of Gildorym is multifaceted. First, as illustrated by the destruction of the city of Maer Dauldon, there is the collective narrative experience of a community that exists in the specific context of a *D&D* inspired game world. After Maer Dauldon burned down, some members joined forces to build new cities. Members can choose to live in towns instead of building a house out in the wilderness. The community is made of members of different races and character classes. Therefore, the second narrative experience is that of a subgroup within the larger community of Gildorym.⁴² Finally, because role-play is taken so seriously within the community, as evidenced by the requirement that players answer the application questions as their avatar and the rules for player-to-player interactions, there is the player's narrative experience as an individual participant in the community of the game world.

⁴² These subgroups are not always dependent on character race or class. Usually, subgroups are formed between players that have formed a relationship from frequent one-on-one interaction. Sometimes subgroups are formed around a specific object, such as building a house.

In the scene at Frostflow Lighthouse in *Skyrim*, in the random in-game events of *TWOM* and in the online world of Guildorym, the player is an active participant. In *Skyrim*, the player forms a picture of events that have transpired based on clues provided by in-game text in the form of journals and notes as well as the staged setting and in-game objects at the lighthouse. In *This War of Mine* on the other hand, the player must make irreversible decisions based on in-game events that occur randomly, and without warning. The player must base her in-game decisions on careful consideration of the player-characters she controls. The questions of who to feed and who to leave hungry, who to save and who to leave behind, who to trade with and who to steal from are all dependent upon the goal of survival, which as demonstrated earlier in this chapter, comes at a price in *TWOM*. Rather than being responsible for “filling in the gaps” to figure out the events of the past, in *TWOM*, the player must make choices that will irreversibly alter the future. In the community of Guildorym, the player takes part in a carnival of second life, not one that is Bakhtin’s medieval celebration of the grotesque, but a creative world nevertheless, in which the player assumes a role within a self-organized community and becomes the creator/author of narrative experience.

CONCLUSION IN WHICH VIDEO GAMES MAY SOMEDAY BE GREAT ART

This writer concedes to Roger Ebert. There is no video game equivalent to any film, poem, play, novel, painting or song that high culture purists consider great works of art. However, four months after denouncing the status of video game as an art form, Ebert also conceded to its advocates:

I thought about those works of Art that had moved me most deeply. I found most of them had one thing in common: Through them I was able to learn more about the experiences, thoughts and feelings of other people. My empathy was engaged . . . They could instruct me about life, love, disease and death, principles and morality, humor and tragedy. . . . But I was unable to say how music or abstract art could perform those functions, and yet they were Art. Even narrative art didn't qualify, because I hardly look at paintings for their messages . . . I had to be prepared to agree that gamers can have an experience that, for them, is Art. ("Okay Kids, Play on My Lawn)

Ebert, who did not have the patience nor the desire to sit down and play a video game, still understood on some level, that the aesthetic element of video games, like that of traditional art forms, has a great deal to do with experience. His insight is especially true when it applied to narrative role-playing games.

The video game was first conceived as a result of experimentation with technology in computer science labs of institutions of higher learning in the 1950s. It was almost two decades later that the general public began to accept the medium as a popular form of entertainment. With all the high-powered, technological tools that game designers have at their fingertips, the medium has become more complex graphically and mechanically, and the game development industry is increasingly interested in how to tell a compelling story through gameplay. As this thesis has attempted to show, video

games have the potential to be an excellent medium for storytelling. Many existing games certainly serve as mindless forms of entertainment. There are also blockbuster movies, reality television series, and yes, literature, that serve precisely the same function. They are a product of industry in a globalized culture of capitalism, and that is perhaps the video game's biggest problem. Most blockbuster games (or AAA games) are targeted towards a specific Western demographic: adolescent boys. In *Fable*, the nameless "Hero," could be considered Everyman, but not every "good" man is white with blonde hair and blue eyes. The different character races in *Skyrim*, while fictional, are modelled on the same ethnic stereotypes commonly seen on television and in film. In addition to the insinuation that the "Nords" are the dominant race, the "Khajiit," for example, are a feline race of tribal merchants whose speech patterns suspiciously resemble the stereotypical television portrayal of Middle Eastern-accented English. Moreover, the Khajiits are, as an NPC carriage driver named Bjorlam (incidentally a Nord) says, from the "countries down south." Perhaps Bjorlam means the global south?

Modding culture suggests that game design is becoming more and more accessible to people all around the world. User-generated content that alter graphical elements and in-game objects and behaviours, and mods that add entirely new narrative arcs are all forms of digital creative expression. One Ukrainian community of *Skyrim* players, for example, is working on a mod (as of the time of writing it is still unfinished) that will add an entirely new dimension to the game world of *Skyrim*, inspired by the game world of Albion in *Fable*. Culturally situated video games are also beginning to appear at the periphery of Western-oriented video game development.

Not thematically conducive to the premise of this thesis, but worth mentioning, is *Al-Quwwat al-Khasa*, or *Special Force* (Solution 2003), developed by the Hezbollah

movement. As Vit Sisler describes it in an essay on the representation of Muslims and Arabs in video games titled, *Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games* (2008), *Special Force* “glorif[ies] the role of Hezbollah in the retreat of the Israeli army . . . construct[ing] two basic types of Arab and Muslim hero” (211). The first type, the player character, is “a fearless warrior winning against the odds despite being outnumbered by Zionist forces,” while the second type is “the fallen comrade” whose in-game representation is composed of collectible photographs of real-life Hezbollah fighters who have fallen in battle. Another game, *Tahta al-Ramad*, or *Under Ash* (Dar al-Fikr 2002), comes out of Syria and is situated around the events of the First Intifada (Sisler 212). According to Sisler, “[t]he game is unusually emotional in the way that it presents players with a story starting with the Palestinians' conflict with Israeli soldiers at the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.” The player character, Ahmad, must find a way to get out of the fighting alive. After doing so, Ahmad joins the Palestinian resistance, but while “[c]ombat is central to the gameplay . . . killing civilians is prohibited.”

What is notable about the aforementioned games is that, while they are low quality in terms of graphics and in-game mechanics, the player in the specific context the game world tries to represent can relate to them, whether that relationship is positive or negative. The act of winning in combat against an Israeli soldier, for example, is of affective and symbolic significance to the player who is a Hezbollah fighter. In an expansive open-world epic fantasy RPG like *Skyrim*, a war-themed survival game like *This War of Mine*, an online world of a role-playing community like the Gildorym *Minecraft* server or a propagandic Hezbollah first-person shooter, compelling narrative experiences clearly have one particular element in common: meaningful actions, that is, actions that affect the player and/or have significance within the game world.

Narrative experience in video games is certainly heightened by music, sound effects, graphic detail, game mechanics and user interface, but is not completely reliant on them. This thesis has attempted to illustrate through various examples of role-playing video games that the narrative experience of gameplay is altered and shaped by a player's actions, which can range from dialogic and physical interaction with NPCs or other player characters to in-game decision-making and exploration. During gameplay, especially in role-playing games, the player is highly active in the process of interpretation. The player makes sense of situations and acts in conjunction with context and avatar. However, the player does not carry the sole responsibility for meaningful action. Regardless of the scope of agency afforded to the player, video game designers should make certain that the actions and decisions that the player may take will be meaningful in the sense that actions are somehow rewarded. Looking at the outcomes of player choices in *This War of Mine*, it is clear that a meaningful action does not have to be rewarded by positive outcomes of in-game events. The pay-off of player actions can be as simple as the revelation of new information about the game world or as complex as new, difficult quest that acts a driving force to propel the central narrative forward. As long as a player's actions and the outcome of those actions make sense within the game world, the player can continue to "fill in the gaps" in the narrative experience of the game. When the player is made to perform actions are inconsistent with the game world, there is no reward, as in the case of the sick boy in *Fable*, and gameplay ceases to be a narrative experience.

Valiant Hearts: The Great War (Ubisoft 2014) is an adventure game set during World War I. The player assumes the roles of four different characters who continually cross paths during the course of four years. The game features animated, cartoonish

graphics and features scenes from real historical battles that took place during WWI, such as the Battle of the Marne and the Battle of the Somme. Gameplay in *Valiant Hearts* is accompanied by rather melancholy classical music as well as environmental sound effects, such as the resounding booms of canons and gunfire. There is, however, virtually no dialogue. Every possible in-game action is highlighted and represented by tiny images, including the thoughts of the player characters and NPCs. There is a scene, for example, at a German military camp in which the player assumes the role of Emile, a Frenchman who has been captured. Emile has been put to work in the kitchens. At one point during this scene, a German soldier walks up to Emile with his dog and shouts in gibberish. A speech bubble appears over the soldier's head and displays the images of a dog and a watering dish. The player must then guide Emile in procuring water for the dog. The tragic narrative experience of gameplay in *Valiant Hearts* explores themes of humanity, love and friendship during a very ugly period in the history of mankind solely through player interaction.

The idea that a story can be told without the use of language is not at all groundbreaking. In the history of human kind, all kinds of stories have been told without the use of language in the form of speech or writing: ancient cave paintings, silent film, and performance art such as miming, to name but a few. There have been attempts to adapt what Ebert would have classified as great literary works of art, such as *The Great Gatsby* (Nintendo 1987, Oberion Media 2010) and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (SETA 1989) into video games. These attempts, however, are more oriented towards creating a game within a story than telling a story through gameplay. *Enslaved*, for example, is based on a sixteenth century parabolic Chinese novel, *Journey to the West*. While the novel is set in ancient China and deeply rooted in Buddhism, *Enslaved*:

Odyssey to the West (Namco Bandai 2010) takes place in a post-apocalyptic world in which the player battles killer robots. The only features common to both video game and novel is the use of the same names of the characters.

The fact that the video game is a medium in which narrative experience is reliant on actions that have meaning within the context of the game world and that language is not a requirement for storytelling makes the video game an interesting medium to consider for literature in translation. It would be interesting to see for example, how the 30,000 lines of the Thai epic poem *Phra Aphai Mani*, by national poet Sunthorn Phu, might be translated into a video game. *Phra Aphai Mani* tells the story of the lives of two brothers, Phra Aphai Mani, who is the eldest, and Sri Suwana, who is the younger of the two. Their father is a great prince who rules over a land that is unnamed in the poem. However, the language of the poem depicts rich settings in the lush wilderness and vibrant cities.

The first few hundred lines of the poem are essentially a quest narrative in which Phra Aphai Mani and Sri Suwana are sent away from the palace by their father, Sudasna, who wants them to seek out a master and learn a valuable skill. If the world of *Phra Aphai Mani*, the player would be in control of both brothers at the beginning of the game. In the poem, the boys seek the wise hermits of the jungle and spend two weeks traveling through the jungle to find them. It would not be difficult to render such a scenario within a video game. The player would have to maneuver both player-characters through the jungle until she finds the hermits. The poem does not depict the events that take place in the jungle during the two week journey, but in a video game, the player could be responsible for Pra Aphai Mani's and Sri Suwana's survival for an in-game duration that amounts to fourteen days. In the poem, the brothers find two

hermits, one who is the master of the art of flute playing and the other, a master of martial arts. At this point, in the game version of the text, the player would be able to make her first choice in the main quest. The player must choose which skill she wants to learn. In the poem, Pra Aphai Mani chooses to learn the art of music while Sri Suwana chooses to learn the skill and discipline of martial arts. Since the poem depicts the journeys of both brothers, the game would continue in the narrative arc of the brother whose skill the player chooses.

An interactive digital translation of a work of literature like *Pra Aphai Mani*, if carefully designed as the representation of a narrative art form, would not only help to widen the scope of our experience of the world's literatures. Such a project might also elevate the status and standards of video games from its current position as a medium of the entertainment industry in which content is primarily geared toward the taste of a single demographic.

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