

# Learning to Be Human by Pretending to Be Elves, Dwarves, and Mages: A Phenomenological Aesthetic of Video Games

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Learning to Be Human by Pretending to Be Elves, Dwarves, and Mages:

A Phenomenological Aesthetic of Video Games

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## Dedication

For Tom,

my unwavering partner in saving the world time and again.

Cover image: screenshot of Vivi, a black mage from *Final Fantasy IX* (Square EA, 2000).

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## Chapter One

### Why Study Video Games as a Form of Art?:

#### Dispelling Illusions and Countering the Obvious Objections

Despite initial reluctance from academics, the significance of video games as a cultural form is slowly starting to become acknowledged. Some nations, including the United States, have finally recognized video games as an art form worthy of free speech protection (Schiesel 2011). In the past decade or so, a new field of “game studies” has steadily cropped up and began to gain attention. Several museums have featured video games, such as the 2012 exhibit *The Art of Video Games* at the Smithsonian. Even as they finally begin to scratch the surface of academia, video games have been mostly ignored by philosophers, which seems odd, especially when considering the recent resurgence of philosophical aesthetics in the past few decades. As far as I can find, only a handful of authors have attempted a philosophical examination of video games from the tradition of aesthetics, and only a fraction of those with any appreciable depth. In order to argue not only that video games are an art form worthy of deep examination, but to explore the ways in which they accomplish this uniquely, which is by far the more interesting question, I will draw from these authors, philosophical aesthetics in general, aspects from the field of media studies, video game journalism, and of course my own experiences. The majority of my exposure to video games has been with the first three iterations of Sony’s Playstation console beginning at about the age of six.

Still, many qualifications need to be made. A large proportion of video games are indeed nothing more than vulgar junk, no more deserving of aesthetic examination than a typical Hollywood summer blockbuster or pulp romance. Of the video games that do offer quality gaming experiences, many make no move toward artistic significance. The annual installments

of *Madden* football or *Call of Duty*, the simplicity of *Pac-man*, and the popularity wave of *Angry Birds* have little to say when it comes to the realm of art. They adhere more closely to the concept of a pure game than to cultural expression. Finally, even when a developer sets out with the intention of creating something meaningful, the commodification of the industry encourages publishers to invest in proven formulas that will guarantee a profit rather than encourage innovation or transgression at the sake of prospective sales. If a video game manages to make it through all of these filters, there is still no guarantee that the mode of aesthetic experience offered by a product will be the same, or even similar for all games. Whereas films, novels, and paintings have established relatively stable conventions in the method in which they transmit meaning to the appreciator, the wildly varying types of video games can affect players in an incredibly diverse fashion. Video games can be sources of narrative, competition, social interaction, or mere time killing. For this reason, an open mind as well as frequent references to specific games must be components of this investigation.

Now that the motivation and the scope of this investigation have been established, it is time to turn to the most obvious objections to considering video games as an art form. These problems arise from a surface level consideration of the nature of video games and thus will be considered now in order to allow discussion of deeper and more interesting issues. A good place to start is the series of opinion articles released by famed film critic Roger Ebert. In 2006 he sparked a furious online debate when he declared that video games could not be art (Ebert 2007). He admits that games may be visually beautiful, engaging, and evoke powerful emotions in players, but still denies the title of art. In fact, he wonders why gamers even seek the designation, as if they desire some sort of legitimization. Many worthwhile pastimes can profoundly move

and enrich the participants with instances of elegance (sports and chess come to mind), yet don't strike us as art.

After this concession, he states his reasons. For one, a video game most often involves competition, either between players or the player and the game itself; games are played to be won. This seems fundamentally different from an artwork which is experienced. Ebert is certainly correct here. Even if a game has artistic qualities, the player must demonstrate skill in order to traverse the "text." Game studies theorist Espen Aarseth designates such objects ergodic texts<sup>1</sup>. This characteristic of video games may in fact be one reason that they have been neglected as an object of study. The skills necessary to play games must be cultivated over time and most games assume at least a basic level of understanding and facility of control over the interface. These circumstances may provide a barrier to entry for scholars. In terms of the possibility of an ergodic text to be artistic, the method of interaction between an appreciator and the text differs from that with traditional artworks. As a player proceeds through a game, he is searching for opportunities to improve performance. In contrast, art requires the appreciator to search for meaning, symbols, emotional expression, and ideas. The latter experience is usually termed aesthetic, whereas the former does not obviously align with this designation. What Ebert seems to miss is that it needn't. There seems to be no a priori reason to believe that an artifact may not simultaneously invite both a competitive and aesthetic experience. What can be expected to change is the flavor of the aesthetic experience as a result of the addition of this novel element. If video games are demonstrated to be artworks, then they will have a unique aesthetic character that reflects its competitive nature.

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<sup>1</sup> In this context an ergodic text is one that takes nontrivial effort to traverse. The concept will be more closely examined in chapter three.

Ebert points out another obvious difference between video games and traditional artworks in the capability of player input that can alter the outcome of the game. He believes authorial control is necessary in order to treat a theme with any reasonable amount of subtlety and depth. Choices afforded to the player, by his reasoning, only decrease the opportunity for the author to inject meaning into the work. Responding to British horror novelist, philosopher, and game designer Clive Barker who claims that offering multiple emotional journeys in the same world should qualify as a form of art, Ebert sarcastically comments,

If you can go through “every emotional journey available,” doesn’t that devalue each and every one of them? Art seeks to lead you to an inevitable conclusion, not a smorgasbord of choices. If next time, I have Romeo and Juliet go through the story naked and standing on their hands, would that be way cool or what? (Ebert 2007)

This opinion arises from the mistaken conception that if video games qualify as art, then they will in the same manner as films, novels, or drama. What if the element of player choice provides the primary artistic element? If the player’s decisions can contribute to the outcome of an emotional journey, won’t the result feel more powerful, more personal? Moreover, Ebert glosses the fact that in many games, the player does not affect the overall narrative, thus the “smorgasbord of choices” can still be a part of a cohesive whole. Certainly more important, however, is the fact that every choice offered to the player is specifically chosen by the game designer. The player is directed along one of several paths, rather than passively pulled like a filmgoer. By no means are most games designed with the intention of granting every choice artistic significance, the meaning of which will be explored in the next chapter, but the potential is still there, and the best games take advantage of it, at least occasionally.



Mitch Dyer, columnist for the video game website IGN, brings up a more disturbing problem. He opens the article “How Long Can Video Games Matter” (2013) with the challenge to come up with twenty novels that will still be relevant in one hundred years, then the same for films. Lastly, he asks for a similar list comprised of video games and rightly points out that it probably cannot be done. Video games tend to stay popular for only a short time, with only a few “masterpieces” more than ten years old managing to remain relevant. Part of the problem is the infancy of the medium. Whereas drama had been developing and creating a canon of techniques for hundreds of years before Shakespeare wrote, video games are barely forty years from their birth. Dyer points out two issues video games must overcome if they are to attain lasting importance. The first is the prominence of brands, or franchises in the industry, which is driven by financial considerations. As a result, “every video game sequel seems to be about doing something better rather than having something to say. They don't really add to the art -- they improve on past mistakes” (Dyer 2013). Disregarding the most recent developments in abstract art, technical skill has always been an element of art creation, but this skill must be utilized in the service of something beyond itself. Rather than focusing on the aesthetic content of a game, much of the developer’s time is spent improving the graphics, interface, artificial intelligence, and mechanics of the game. New installments in a series eliminate the need to play earlier entries. Dyer questions, “What other medium seeks out its own obsolescence?” For this reason, he predicts no video game will continue to sell copies very far into the future, like a Dickens novel continues to do for example. The second problem is more inherent in the technological nature of the medium itself. The industry develops “generationally,” particularly with respect to consoles as opposed to computers, meaning that access to games from previous generations

becomes more difficult as time goes on. This model discourages players from going back into the history of gaming to experience earlier works.

Responding to these issues seemingly barring video games from lasting artistic significance gives a purpose to this paper. If video games are a form of art worth experiencing, then the loss of the foundational works of the medium would be a tragedy. Future study will require archiving and preservation, but these will never be a priority as long as video games are viewed only as a disposable form of entertainment. The development of the medium has been so rapid as to make works less than a decade old “classics,” which nevertheless become forgotten as the next generation accumulates excitement. I argue that many of these games have something to offer despite the restrictions posed by the technology at the time of their creation.

The other problems laid out by Dyer seem at least in theory to be surmountable. The sequel problem stems from an economic paradigm that does not need to dominate. Indeed Dyer cites several games including *Flower*, *Journey*, and *The Walking Dead*, that break away from this mold in order to create experiences fundamentally different from any of their predecessors. While these games are the exception to the rule, the maturation of the industry is resulting in a continually growing number of titles like these. Even within brands, some franchises do take advantage of the developing technology to add novel elements to their games. The *Mario* and *Final Fantasy* series each contain numerous entries, but each one attempts to offer something not available in any of the other iterations, whether in terms of story, emotional engagement, or gameplay design. Over time, it seems that Dyer’s third list is slowly being filled, but only the test of time will tell.

Another criticism commonly leveled at games involves their supposed method of stimulation rather than engagement of their audience by means of shallow depictions of violent and sexual themes. Video games offer cheap thrills, an adrenaline rush from sensory input, rather than the cognitive involvement of art, or so the argument goes. Unfortunately, this accusation far too often hits its mark. The shallow subject matter and dearth of emotional complexity are a symptom of the entertainment industry as a whole, not just video games. Simply put, sex and violence sells; there is no escaping the truth of it. While most of the games I will be discussing are exceptions to this rule, it will still be worthwhile to examine this cultural phenomenon which is linked to a far more interesting development that has been dubbed by media scholars as the neo-baroque. Angela Ndalians (2004) among others sees a number of similarities between contemporary media and baroque art. In addition to surface similarities such as a preoccupation with the magical or fantastic Ndalians cites several shared characteristics that supposedly weakens their artistic significance. The works lack a clear boundary from reality, value technical skill over profundity, contain an excess of content, and present meaning in flashes that illuminate a larger whole. Each of these characteristics will be examined in turn, as well as their implications for the status of video games as art.

Baroque sculpture and architecture may often be characterized by the bleeding of ornament into the structure itself. A pillar may have no clear boundary from the ceiling since it is laden with ornamentation, or a painting's subject will be cropped by the frame. This style tends to blur the boundary between the work and reality. Video games take this element to another level. The flow of the game depends on the physical actions of the player in the real world with respect to the handheld controller. Interaction flows in the other direction as well. For example, the death of a character might signify that the player has lost the game, a real event with

repercussions beyond the artwork. A controller might vibrate as the floor shakes in the game world. Additionally, video games are especially successful in creating a sense of presence within a fictional world. Players will physically lean, jump, or cower in response to the events in the game. These ideas and their relation to the artistic status of video games will be considered more deeply within the concept of phenomenological embodiment in chapter four. Blending art and reality does not seem to reduce the artistic merit of the work; in fact, it appears to allow experiences of a more engaging sort. If art can produce tangible effects on the audience, then the tools artists have at their disposal should be strengthened because of it.

The development tendency in mainstream video game graphics has relentlessly pursued photorealism. Often the quest for graphical spectacle leaves the developer with little time to innovate in terms of gameplay. Unfortunately, this often results in pretty games that demonstrate the technical skill of the programmers with very little to offer in terms of substance. Andrew Darley (2002) also brings attention to this tendency in visual digital culture as a whole. Fantastic action sequences, ubiquitous computer animation, and self-conscious style are replacing character and plot, particularly in film and video games. There is not much that can be done to avoid this result of the commodification of cultural artifacts except to search for those that manage to break free of these constraints, a task that has now become routine for appreciators looking for quality films and novels. Furthermore, there is another way in which video games can be said to encourage virtuosity: through facility with their controls. Many games require quick reflexes and fingers to respond automatically to stimuli rather than considered action. In this case the player may be more involved in developing skill in the game than attempting to draw meaning from it. Of course the inclusion of this element does not preclude the capability of artistic expression. For example *Bioshock* (2K Games, 2007) is a first-

person shooter, a genre that relies heavily on twitch reflexes, that I argue delivers a profound experience of a sort comparable to enjoying a great novel or film.

Baroque art is perhaps infamous for having a lot going on at the same time. Arguably, the sheer volume of content corresponds to a diminished role played by fictional meaning of the interpreted kind. The tendency can be seen in video games in the central element of repetition. Fictional worlds or scenarios are often revisited for a new perspective in the form of sequels or spinoffs rather than treated once with a tight story. In this paradigm narrative possibility is expanded rather than deepened. Cognitive involvement often takes the form of increasing knowledge of the game world as opposed to interpretation of the meaning revealed by it. In another medium, this would definitely be a sign of shallowness, but in video games it is not necessarily so. Learning about the fictional world inhabited by a character that can only be observed may be interesting, but when the player is an active participant in this world, knowledge of its workings is necessary to motivate meaningful action. If the player is given the choice between two characters to support, as happens often in *Mass Effect 2* (Electronic Arts, 2011), the decision only carries weight if the player has extensive background information regarding the motivation, personality, and legitimacy of each character, knowledge which can only be gained through a surplus of content.

Additionally, the actual experience of playing a video game may be highly repetitive, far beyond the degree that would be considered acceptable in any other artistic medium. For example, the *Final Fantasy* role-playing games force the player to undergo hundreds of battles that operate under similar mechanics in order to reach the ending. The obvious analysis would argue that the repetitious battles could not possibly add any meaning to the game and must detract from the narrative which is delivered between lengthy series of battles. However, these

battles contribute to the experience of the game in subtle ways. Over time the characters gain new abilities that may be utilized in encounters, manifesting their gradual increase in strength as the story progresses. Particular characters may be utilized differently and their performance in battle can both reinforce and add nuance to character traits established in the narrative proper. For example, Steiner and Vivi who appear in *Final Fantasy IX* (Square EA, 2000) quickly develop a touching camaraderie upon meeting. They are also the only characters who may combine their powers in battle for unique attacks. If the player takes advantage of this capability, the friendship of the characters will feel stronger by the end of the story. Furthermore, the artistic success of the narrative depends on the player having developed a relationship with the main characters. The sense of having undergone a long journey with a group of friends is substantiated by undergoing the time-intensive experience of seeing the characters grow, sharing the hardship of difficult battles, and defeating worthy enemies. The process is organic and functions in amazingly similar ways to the development of relationships in real life. This is a result unique to video games and its investigation forms my argument for their status as a new form of art that blurs the distinction between fiction and reality in aesthetically meaningful ways.

Lastly, meaning in gameplay is often experienced in flashes, separate bursts of understanding. This mode of engagement seems inherent to video games and can be analyzed in different ways. First, the narratives in games are often interspersed throughout the gameplay in the form of pre-rendered videos called cut-scenes. This means that unless the designer manages to infuse meaning into the gameplay itself, there will be a cycle of aesthetic engagement and pure objective-based play. Some games do operate in this manner and by that token fail to take advantage of the artistry unique to the medium. Alternatively, certain moments of gameplay can occur in which all the elements come together and “click,” resulting in total immersion in the

game. Depending on the game, these experiences can be occasional or sustained. These flashes of harmony with the system allow a sort of vicarious experience that will be shown to grant the opportunity for all the greatest artistic components of video games to work.

Hopefully this discussion has provided sufficient motivation for the examination of video games as an object of serious philosophical study. Having illustrated the problems that must be overcome, it remains to be shown the ways in which video games can be considered an engaging, rich, and unique medium of art. Discussing the ways in which games might accomplish this will prove far more rewarding than arguing for a label. My aesthetic of video games will arise from an application of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's existential philosophy of embodiment. In order to establish a framework for this discussion, several aesthetic theories applicable to video games will be introduced, analyzed, and adapted. From there I will consider whether video games can be texts in the traditional sense before tackling the major issues of narrative and emotion.

## Chapter Two

### Systems of Aesthetics

The debate in philosophical aesthetics over the definition of art has raged since the days of Plato and Aristotle, so much so that many philosophers now deny the possibility of a satisfactory definition. To rehearse this argument would be far beyond the scope of this paper. No definition is going to satisfy everyone, and the inclusion of video games to the catalog of art media may require a reformulation of the definition anyway. Nevertheless, if an argument is to be made for video games as a form of art, then a workable concept must be established. Rather than settling on any one method of approaching art, I will incorporate several canonical philosophical traditions that lend themselves to the analysis of video games in addition to a few ideas of my own. This approach will emphasize the value of art rather than the characteristics of artworks that make them such. I will argue that video games provide many of the same benefits that we generally expect from art in order to suggest their validity. This chapter thus aims to show that within the four frameworks explored here video games have a legitimate claim to the status of art. Having established the motivation, the rest of the paper will develop my own theory which involves a reformulation of the concept of embodiment as set out by Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

#### 2.1 Dewey: *Art as Experience*

One such method may be found in John Dewey's system of pragmatist aesthetics. Philip Deen (2011) begins to apply this theory to video games, but the concepts he introduces can be taken even further. Deen points out two characteristics of Dewey's aesthetics that make it particularly sensible to investigate video games as art. First, there is no hard, essential division



between fine art and popular culture. For Dewey, the only possible result of this division is a deadening of art. Many of the objects that are now considered artworks were once the practical objects of earlier times, including weapons, ceramics, furniture, and ritualized images. It is only after the Enlightenment idea of “art for art’s sake” that it has become isolated from other experience. Rather than associating a unique aesthetic experience with art, he posits that this sort of experience can be found in many aspects of everyday life. He claims, “experience signifies active and alert commerce with the world; at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events” (Dewey 2005). When a cohesive experience with a specific quality can be undergone as a complete, satisfying whole that is self-sufficient, it may be designated as aesthetic. This type of experience can arise from activities as diverse as viewing a piece of art, formulating a mathematical proof, and enacting a gambit in chess. These activities share the characteristic of possessing a well-defined endpoint, which upon being reached grants a sense of satisfaction. They end with “a consummation and not a cessation.” Their aesthetic qualities thus exist as a spectrum rather than isolated types. However, Dewey does provide a qualifier that may be used to distinguish an art object: “To be truly artistic, a work must also be esthetic- that is, framed for enjoyed receptive perception... The doing or making is artistic when the perceived result is of such a nature that *its qualities as perceived* have controlled the question of production.” Thus what separates an artwork from a proof is that one is created primarily to be appreciated, the other to solve a problem. Both may share characteristics of elegance, insight, and nuance, but only the artwork is organized with these as the primary features.

Deen points out that this method of creation may be used to describe video games, such that successful game design may be defined as allowing the player to enter into fruitful interaction with the game that yields a qualitative unity and thus an aesthetic experience. Dewey

already includes the playing of a game as an aesthetic experience, so when the format of the game allows a designer to unify aspects of the game with a single vision, it does not seem a stretch to call video games art. The artistry of a video game would thus begin on a surface level. The visual and sound effects, narrative (if the game has one), music, and style of gameplay would have to coalesce into a unified whole. Disregarding the element of gameplay, these considerations do not differ from those that go into creating a film. Player choice is the hallmark of games, but the choices offered to the player must be part of a framework such that they carry some sort of weight, choice not just for the sake of it, but in order to contribute to play in a meaningful way. This requires the designer to have a clear idea of the quality of the experience he wishes the player to undergo, which is, of course, precisely Dewey's criterion for artistic production.

Bypassing this preliminary observation, Deen proceeds directly to a discussion of experience as it relates uniquely to video games. The possibility of losing comprises a key component of video games. Instead of a straightforward, linear progression, playing a game involves alternating states of triumph and defeat, a "slow build to victory" rather than a passive reception of a story. Additionally video games are often split into "levels" or sections that may involve different types of gameplay. This cycle generates a rhythm to gameplay which gives each game a specific flavor. This idea of rhythm will be treated in more depth when examining the ideas of Gene Kirkpatrick below. Upon completion of the game, all previous failures are subsumed into the experience of the game as a whole, resulting in the sense of satisfaction that Dewey discusses in addition to a feeling not typically associated with art, accomplishment. Despite the tendency to break up the narrative, these failures form an integral part of the experience. Deen also argues that Dewey's experiential model applies even when there is no

story. He cites racing games and dungeon crawlers which revolve around acquiring items or points. The methods and challenges of obtaining them grant gameplay structure and lead to rhythms that generate satisfaction which includes and consummates earlier elements. Thus, “the experience has a dramatic structure irrespective of whether the game does,” meaning that video games may be aesthetically evaluated as a unique aesthetic object rather than in terms of the elements that it borrows from other art forms, such as story, visuals, and music.

The second key component of Dewey’s aesthetics that Deen considers relevant to video game has already been touched on; Dewey grants central importance to not only the author’s creation of, but also the audience’s interaction with the art object. In his view it is not the artwork alone, but the appreciator’s transaction with it that makes an aesthetic experience possible; that is, there is no such thing as artistry without aesthetics. In describing the creation of an artwork, Dewey claims, “The making comes to an end when its result is experienced as good [by the artist] – and that experience comes not by mere intellectual and outside judgment but in direct perception” (Dewey 2005). Artworks obtain their meaning from the processes of both creation and appreciation. The aesthetic experience is what matters, not the method of interaction, so there is no reason to exclude the paradigm of a game from the possibilities.

Deen cites Henry Jenkins as another author who recognizes that video games can provide these experiences. Jenkins discusses certain sequences of gameplay in which “memorable moments emerge when all of the elements of the medium come together to create a distinctive and compelling experience” (Jenkins 2005). Anyone who has some experience with video games will know exactly what Jenkins is talking about. For me, his description of memorable moments immediately summons memories of several battles in *Shadow of the Colossus*, my first encounter with a Big Daddy and Little Sister in *Bioshock*, and a particular collapse of the fourth wall in

*Metal Gear Solid*. Each of these sequences relies on the interaction of the player to bring together the best parts of their respective games in order to deliver an experience that could only occur in a video game, whether as a result of the ingenuity of the player, a moral conundrum, or the quirks of the medium itself. These memorable moments serve as points where the particular mode of play in each game reaches its most engaging and satisfying level, tending to distill the experience of the whole game into a short sequence, thus serving as microcosms of the consummations of which Dewey speaks. More on this phenomenon will be addressed in chapter five.

As an interesting instance of the importance of audience interaction with the art object, Deen draws attention to the growing popularity of “sandbox” or open world type games in recent years. In these types of games, the player is given much more freedom in shaping the experience, consequently usurping some of the authorial control from the designer. This freedom allows for a tightening of the bond that exists between artist and audience, leading exactly to the circumstances Dewey uses to describe art and thus granting games aesthetic status: “art, in its form unites the very same relation of doing and undergoing, outgoing and incoming energy, that makes an experience to be an experience” (Dewey 2005). Art creation and appreciation intermingle, just as an experience involves both external stimuli and the response to it. When designing the game, the creator must enter the mind of the player in order to ensure that the choices contribute to a structured experience. Likewise, the player attempts to predict the implications of actions that may be programmed into the game. In these games, the experience is often shaped by earlier actions of the player. For example, one might be refused help in a quest after committing a reprehensible act in a nearby village. The designer must strike a delicate balance between offering the player choices and structuring the game to provide a worthwhile

experience that feels cohesive. In the best case scenario, the player gets to direct the flow of the experience within the channels provided by the designer without feeling either lost or constrained. Video games foreground the interaction between the player and game, providing perhaps an even stronger example of the dialogue that Dewey uses to describe art. When carried out successfully, this is an immensely powerful tool for creating aesthetic experience. In addition to the feeling of unity that comes from experience of traditional artworks, the agency of the player means that he has actually contributed to the consummation of the game. This role generates feelings of accomplishment. In addition, the impact of traditional aesthetic elements such as the narrative and emotional elements are almost always strengthened due to the involvement of the player. This amplification of the aesthetic response is tightly linked to the concept of immersion, the feeling of having passed into an imagined world, which will be expanded upon later.

Lastly, Deen discusses Dewey's conception of emotion in art. Dewey distinguishes discharge and expression of emotion. In order to grant an aesthetic experience, emotion must be expressed, that is mediated or refined by combination with carefully selected aesthetic elements into a unified whole. The burden is, however, not solely on the author. The audience has a responsibility to internalize this expression thoughtfully, situating it within the larger experience if it is to carry any meaning. Even when thus mediated, this expression should not be a statement in the explicit sense. Emotion, as well as cognitive ideas, should be embedded in the aesthetic materials rather than the elements being used as symbols. Artists must follow the familiar mantra, "show, don't tell." Thus game designers have several pitfalls to avoid when incorporating emotion into games. First, raw emotion that prompts nothing more than a knee jerk reaction should be used sparingly as it contributes little to the aesthetic experience. Second, the

emotion is ideally integrated into the gameplay rather than delivered to a passive player through cut-scenes or text. Some games rise to this challenge. For example, Deen cites the *God of War* series: the games

Present a protagonist fueled by pure rage and it is possible to enjoy it on that level alone. However, the compelling story and visceral gameplay offer more than just stimulation. In playing the role of Kratos there is a virtual embodiment of anger, a muscular quality that is immersive and satisfying. It constitutes the experience of rage. (Deen)

Deen does not discuss it, but video games allow for an entirely new range of emotional involvement in art. This opportunity arises from the players' direct involvement in the fiction of the game. The emotions in video games will be discussed in depth in a later chapter.

There is one component of Dewey's philosophy that Deen mentions, but glosses over, failing to see the significance of the insight he has made. While laying down the framework for his discussion of interactivity he explains Dewey's conception of it with regard to experience in general: "interaction is marked by periods of disharmony and re-harmonization where we fall out of habitual relation with the world and have to develop new ways of fruitfully transacting with it" (Deen). He sees the process of failure, readjustment, and retrying as the way in which humans grow. While it may be useful to consider our general interaction with the world in this way, the description undoubtedly provides an excellent explanation of playing a video game. Games are meant to be challenging, and thus they result in periodic failure, as has been discussed. From these failures, the player learns how to improve at playing the game; he identifies and begins to consciously develop the skills needed to succeed. Alternatively, repeated failure will prompt the

player to approach the situation from a new direction, to try a new strategy. This experimentation and skill development, likely with a dose of repetition and dedication, will eventually result in successful interaction with the game and hence progress within it. The patterns of failure and triumph coincide with the cycle of harmonization which Dewey explains. When crafted into a complete experience, this means that the act of playing games can be aestheticized. Though he speaks from the viewpoint of his own aesthetic theory of video games, developer and theorist Frank Lantz seems to be right on the money when he describes music as the aestheticizing of sound, painting as the aestheticizing of the visual, and video games as the aestheticizing of thought and action (Lantz 2011) . The interactive nature of video games allows elements of human experience previously inaccessible to art to be tapped. Traditional art grants an aesthetic experience based on the input of the artist; a video game allows one to be crafted based on the input of the player. As a result our active sensibilities, including our thoughts, decisions, and actions, can be played upon in addition to the traditionally invoked passive sensibilities of sympathy, fear, hope, curiosity, and others. Dewey puts it more eloquently when he states, “Art is the living and concrete proof that man is capable of restoring consciously, and thus on the plane of meaning, the union of sense, need, impulse and action characteristic of the live creature” (Dewey 2005). As before, the experiences of everyday life, through the mediation of art, bleed into the aesthetic. By responding to player action, video games achieve this union to a fuller extent than other art; or to put it another way, they grant us the possibility of cultivating aesthetic experiences that were previously confined to the real world in fictional ones. In a video game, one can safely undergo the experience of exploring a fictional world, not by identifying with a character who does it for you, but by actually doing it yourself. Again, Dewey’s philosophy

allows for the study of video games without ignoring the features that makes them unique compared to other forms of art.

## 2.2 Kant and Free Play

Immanuel Kant's conception of aesthetics revolves around the key concepts of free play, semblance of purpose, and judgments of taste. For Kant, the object of a judgment is always a representation. A judgment of taste results when one is able to consider the representation in itself, isolated from any external conditions such as desire for the object or consideration of its utility. The judgment is based on a feeling of pleasure that results from the free play of the cognitive faculties of the imagination and understanding. The imagination is related only to the intuition of an object by means of its form whereas understanding applies a concept to the form and thus deals with its content. A beautiful object may be designated as one in which its form has only a semblance of purpose, a sense of finality without actually stating a clear idea. Free play arises when the faculty of understanding attempts to subsume the semblance of purpose from the imagination. Beauty grants pleasure as understanding considers the infinite possibilities of interpreting a concept from the semblance of purpose, but none of these concepts can be firmly affixed and hence extracted, so any meaning in the artwork remains firmly rooted in the experience of it. Appreciation of traditional artworks involves the drama of reuniting form with meaning in the context of a static object. In contrast, video games only attain their form during interaction with a player.

Kirkpatrick (2011) utilizes this framework to argue that video games are aesthetic artifacts, yet fall short of achieving the status of art. In his view, the artist manipulates the form of a work in the service of generating meaning. The semblance of purpose of the work thus



allows a consistent approach to meaning in a determined direction, even if it does not state that meaning explicitly. He argues video games are characterized by a “sense of meaning that suffuses a scene of play with little or nothing in the way of plotline or narrative actually informing the play process” (Kirkpatrick). Player action is concerned with interacting with the rules of the game rather than creating meaning. Thus he claims that video games can offer an experience of aesthetic form, but they ultimately fail in their capacity to communicate meaning. That is he believes that video games can be beautiful, but since the main object of the player is to win the game rather than appreciate it in itself, he concludes the player’s actions must be interpreted in that context. The player can generate visuals, sounds, and rhythmic experiences that contain a semblance of purpose, yet they point to nothing beyond themselves other than this established goal unlike in an artwork. In this respect Kirkpatrick compares video games to dance, drawing a similarity between the ways both encourage an appreciation of aesthetic form without being able to communicate. I will aim to show that this conception falls short of what video games can achieve. It should be noted that Kirkpatrick does not deny the possibility of artistic elements within games. Video game narratives can be aesthetic in the same way as an artistic film’s, even if they are usually inferior in quality. He is concerned, however, in which aspects of games unique to the medium may be considered aesthetic, not shoehorning games into existing paradigms. He, and I, want to consider the actual act of playing as an aesthetic experience.

The insistence on emphasizing the unique aesthetic experience of actually playing a video game leads Kirkpatrick in the right direction, yet he seems to miss the opportunities in which gameplay can in fact be effectively linked with the underlying narrative, subsuming gameplay into a genuinely artistic combination with the fiction. It is true that in itself, gameplay may not be essentially linked to meaning. The player is free to control the avatar in ways that are pointless,

absurd, or unrelated to the game as a fiction or if the game lacks one, to the qualitative mood associated with the game. For example, there is nothing to prevent the player from jumping around in circles in the presence of enemies. Nevertheless, there do seem to be instances when the player is offered the opportunity to directly contribute to the construction of meaning through the process of gameplay.

One particularly effective example can be found in the opening sequence of *God of War 3* (Sony Computer Entertainment 2010). After defeating the Greek god Poseidon, the protagonist Kratos is granted the opportunity to enact the vengeance he has been seeking since his betrayal by the gods of Olympus. The perspective switches to a first person view as seen by Poseidon as Kratos, who the player controls, approaches. The game enters a scripted sequence in which a specific series of inputs is demanded of the player. These inputs correspond to Kratos systematically dismantling the god of the sea. One button needs to be pressed repeatedly as Kratos slams Poseidon's face into a wall and the view becomes progressively blurred and reddened by blood. In a particularly visceral moment the player must use both thumbs to press in on the analog sticks on the controller, exactly mimicking the physical movements of Kratos in the game as he gouges out his opponents eyes. One final series of inputs sends the lifeless body hurtling over a cliff.

Several components of this scene contribute to its artistic success. By now, the narrative has established Kratos's motivation of revenge and his pained existence fueled by rage. In the course of the gameplay leading up to this point, the player has performed violent actions, albeit on monsters drawn from Greek mythology. This moment is the first in the game in which Kratos attacks another person. By switching to the perspective of Poseidon, the player is granted an alternative view of the protagonist. The player is immediately struck by the ruthless, terrifying,

vicious killing machine he has become. The synchronization created between the physical actions of the player on the controller and Kratos in the game allow the murder to be experienced rather than merely observed, and the effect is disturbing. The overall consequence of this sequence is to combine the advancement of the narrative, intense emotional involvement, the experience of multiple perspectives, and the act of gameplay into a cohesive whole. The meaning communicated by the scene would not be accomplished in the same way without the player taking an active role. In terms of Kant's aesthetics, this scene achieves the semblance of purpose that engages the understanding in the way that art does as opposed to pure form. Even though the player retains a degree of control, the scene plays out the same way every time the game is played, so that the player's actions can be inextricably linked to the representational elements of the game. The presence of meaning inherent in form without its explicit statement is preserved; the game manages to let the player forget about winning the game to instead focus on the events as they relate to the narrative.

The concept of free play can even be extended in terms of video games to allow for richer experiences. It was mentioned that Kant sees pleasure as derived from considering the infinite possibilities of interpreting a concept from the semblance of purpose. Video games differ from traditional art in that each experience of playing may be different due to the dependence on player input. This allows the same cultural product to tie the provided forms to a variety of meanings, or alternatively, to allow multiple forms to provide the semblance of the same meaning, possibly creating a much wider range of possibility than different interpretations of a static work. While it has been acknowledged that a substantial amount of gameplay may not be intrinsically tied to meaning, there is still potential for the reception of novel aesthetic experiences from the same game. This aspect dramatically increases the capacity for worthwhile

engagement that a game can provide. The fact that some games can take up to one hundred hours to complete whereas films longer than three hours are rare evidences the richness of content games are able to provide. For example, in *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Softworks 2006) the player explores a massive fictional world, completing quests for various residents and spending a large amount of time simply discovering all the world has to offer. The player is free to choose whether to be a law-abiding citizen of this world. Choosing to obey the law means that one can interact normally with the governments of the various towns, engage in trade with merchants, and travel freely. Choosing to break the law means the player must always keep an eye out for the city watch, can no longer buy from merchants they steal from, and may even be shut off from some quests if certain characters happen to be killed. The two play styles yield vastly different experiences and the designers facilitate both types by making sure that whatever the player chooses, something meaningful will happen. The number of possibilities for the semblance of purpose to take on is thus dramatically increased. The player can derive different interpretations of the same concepts or events in the game based on the type of involvement up to that point. Video games therefore offer something new that traditional static artworks cannot.

### 2.3 Kirkpatrick: Rhythm, Space, and Time

As has briefly been mentioned, Gene Kirkpatrick argues for the aesthetic significance of video games while denying them the status of art. Central to this discussion are the ways games relate to our experience of space and time. As an essential starting point, he shows that space and time are not experienced objectively; an hour spent paying bills or waterskiing do not seem to pass at the same rate and a living room may contain the same furniture as a doctor's waiting room yet feels much more comfortable. Aesthetic objects function by manipulation of our sense of space and time; video games function uniquely with respect to both. The virtual nature of a

game means that the space of the work is entered and examined from the inside. Experience of the game space is not with the flat screen on which the image is projected, but rather the architecture within the game. When the player is given control of the virtual camera, a limitless number of perspectives are opened up. At first, it seems as if this would remove the possibility for a game designer to craft the desired experience. Yet according to Kirkpatrick, the movement between perspectives is part of what provides the pleasure. Interacting with the game requires intuiting, responding to, and producing a formal reality. A necessary consequence is that the visual (and auditory) content of the game is filtered for the means of gameplay. The method in which a player analyzes the representation of a game environment is fundamentally different from that which would be the case for a film. The eye scans for objects with which the player can interact. Designers can use this fact to draw the player's attention to specific aspects of the environment for a variety of aesthetic purposes. This is how designers can ensure that even though players may have different perspectives, they are looking at the same things; some degree of control remains, though admittedly less than artists have traditionally held.

Equally important in Kirkpatrick's estimation to the aesthetics of video games is the way in which they affect our experience of time. As previously mentioned games are often divided into levels or feature cut-scenes between sequences of play. This partitioning results in alternation of intense activity and relaxation that grants a sense of completion of the previous segment. As the player progresses through these repetitions, a rhythmic interaction between them gives the game a distinct feel or aesthetic. The cycles of expectation in play resulting from tension and release work in the same way as the play of the semblance of meaning in aesthetic art: the process of looking at a work of art in a certain way, trying to attach a meaning to it, then approaching it from another direction. The resulting rhythms may be manipulated to produce a

desired aesthetic effect. For example, the game may cue the player to different modes of interaction such as exploring, solving puzzles, or combat. Each of these activities engages the player in a different way and produces a different feeling in the player. If a game involves multiple types of gameplay, then the duration of each element in the cycle can be altered to yield an aesthetic effect. In this respect, video games operate in a manner similar to music. For instance, the frequency of action sequences might be increased in order to create a sense of urgency or excitement, or the cycle might be completely broken so as to deflate the player. The experience of failure in a video game may be understood in this way. Losing breaks the rhythm of the game and forces a reevaluation of the process of play before beginning it again. Interpreted this way, gaining mastery of the game means calibrating one's actions to the rhythm of the game; recognition and response must be reduced to the same instant to allow the players actions to flow with the game. Moreover, all of this is accomplished by mediation of movement with the hands via the controller. The link between the physical movement of the player and the movement through virtual space in the game leads Kirkpatrick to compare video games with dance.

The framework of a mediated experience of space and time ultimately serve Kirkpatrick's application of a dance aesthetic to video games which communicates his core ideas. In terms of a player's perception of space in a game, Kirkpatrick argues that the environment and objects within it choreograph the interaction, taking advantage of the players' tendency to search the world for interactive opportunities. On-screen cues are associated with specific manipulations of the controller. The game becomes a sort of puzzle that will punish the player for failing to provide the correct response. Failure will persist until the player masters the action through repetition, much like a dance move. The game designer provides triggers for specific aesthetic

sensations resulting from reaction to representational content from which the player is responsible for cleaving a particular experience of form via successful interaction. The combination of these triggers into a cohesive whole determines the aesthetic character of the game. This model treats the game as a script that must be followed imaginatively rather than mechanically by using the senses, memory, and intuition. The game is thus very similar to a choreographed dance which the player acts out while simultaneously injecting a personal flavor. Basic patterns or moves are established, then modulated and given a certain degree of freedom in their performance. Interaction with the game is epistemic; the player learns what manipulations of the controls accomplish in the game as well as when they are successful. There is thus an inherent tension in the design of a game. Future moves are choreographed but have to appear natural and unconstrained by previous actions. Time is involved in this dance aesthetic in much the same way. In Kirkpatrick's terminology, the imaginative interpretation of the rhythms of a game will draw the player to a particular action, but the player must restrain himself and follow the choreography. Just as in dance, time is suspended in space as the rhythms create a pull toward meaning that cannot be provided. Kirkpatrick believes gameplay which consists only in the movement of the player through the virtual environment does not communicate meaning, just as he believes gesture, meaningful movement, is removed from dance. However, it is this avoidance of resolving to a particular meaning that makes the sensations of gameplay more intense than those in other forms of fiction.

I believe the idea that Kirkpatrick is getting at as well as the shortcomings of his argument can be illustrated well by a sequence from *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2011). One segment sees the protagonist, Nathan Drake, chasing a rival through a crowded city. The path through which the player must guide Drake is almost

completely determined, but the environment is designed so that the player has the illusion of picking out the best path. It is apparent which railings must be vaulted, beams rolled under, and gaps leaped so as to catch the adversary. The chase feels organic and natural despite its high level of scripting. If the player does happen to fail by falling too far behind, the scene must be repeated, forcing the player to adjust more carefully to the choreography of the sequence and master the progression. A certain amount of freedom is allowed, but the overall event must follow the framework provided. Additionally, even though the only information transmitted to the player is movement through an environment it captures elements of desperation, determinedness, and urgency, elements that grant meaning to that movement since they occur within a fictionalized context.

The dance aesthetic Kirkpatrick uses is certainly helpful, but it limits the artistic potential of video games by denying them the capacity to carry meaning. The idea thus requires further examination even though it has been partially dealt with in the previous section. First, it should be noted that he believes meaning to be necessary to motivate continuing play, even if some aspects of the game are nothing more than technical routine. It is not exactly clear where Kirkpatrick finds this motivational meaning. If the narrative of a game provides it, then it is difficult to see how this relates to the concept of pure gameplay if the actions of the player can contribute nothing to it. The only way they could be connected is as parts of an overall rhythmic structure that involves cycling of narrative and gameplay. According to Kirkpatrick, video games use several methods to make up for the lack of meaning in gameplay. One is through contact with the uncanny, things that appear familiar yet alien, which he argues triggers a “sense of deep meaning that cannot be expressed clearly.” The associated air of mystery maintains an interest in narratives that treated as conventional linear stories are usually not very interesting. Video



games' tendency to cultivate an expansion rather than a deepening of knowledge of the game world, which has been discussed, plays into this. However, the most significant way is through their status as games. By concentrating on the rule-based play, the fictional weaknesses take a back seat. Kirkpatrick's analysis of death and tragedy, however, is particularly enlightening. He builds off the claim of Jesper Juul (2005) that video games cannot be tragedies because these are about events beyond our control given meaning by the tragic action of the story. Games on the other hand center on having power and overcoming challenges. Ironically, the very reason he gives for games' inability to be tragic can be seen to strengthen them in this regard. Despite the fundamental reliance on player input, most games progress through a static story to an inevitable ending. They thus offer a firsthand experience of fate, and depending on the nature of the ending, tragedy. In a discussion of theological concepts in video games, Rachel Wagner (2010) suggests they may be seen as an example of the reconciliation of free will and predestination. The sensation of control held by the player is just as illusory as it is for the tragic hero, yet the emotional impact can be more powerful since the force of fate is experienced directly rather than observed.

According to Kirkpatrick's view, in tragedy the death of the hero in the face of fate gives a view of transcendence as we see the human potential to reach beyond causality. Despite, or perhaps due to, meeting a tragic end, the hero manages to provide meaning, thus immortalizing his name. Since failure in a video game only results in the death of a named individuality rather than the vital force of the hero whom is taken control of anew from the last checkpoint, the hero's life becomes meaningless, and thus unable to communicate meaning. Kirkpatrick does see something important here. In many games, failure is an accepted eventuality, so the temporary death of the protagonist does not carry much weight. Some games, however handle this problem

more artfully. For example, in *Heart of Darkness* (Interplay Entertainment, 1998) the player controls a young boy named Andy who has wandered into a dangerous shadow realm in search of his lost dog. Failed play leads to deaths that are astounding both in their variety and grisliness. Many of these deaths are highly disturbing, not only for their manner but also due to the fact that the subject is a child. A desire to avoid witnessing these events provides enough motivation for the player to improve, separate from the drive to win the game. Andy's deaths, though recurring, inarguably retain their impact. Andy's willingness to take on the horrors he faces evidences his love for his dog, the only friend of a boy who the player sees ridiculed at school when the game begins. Since Andy's death retains the ability to emotionally affect the player, its recurrence in different situations allows it to communicate meaning in each of them, or rather in the sum of them. Taking a completely different approach, *BioShock* (2K Games, 2007) utilizes its narrative element of genetic experimentation by scattering "vita-chambers" throughout the game world. These chambers store the character's genetic information so that upon dying, the player simply takes control of a copy and re-enters the game world in exactly the configuration it was left. This narrative device puts an interesting twist on the situation precisely as described by Kirkpatrick. Even a device as simple as the prince who acts as both protagonist and narrator in *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (Yannis Mallat, 2003) claiming to have misremembered the story whenever the player dies provides a clever way to deal with death.

Kirkpatrick's theory as a whole contains several strong points for the analysis of video games. For one, it provides criteria for different games to be evaluated individually in terms of the aesthetic experience each provides. It explains why different genres feel different to play and assigns aesthetic significance to this variation. The analogies to rhythm and choreography as well as the descriptions of specialized methods of experiencing space and time should feel

immediately familiar to those experienced with games. Additionally, this method of engagement is unique to video games, meaning that it should be homing in on the distinctive aesthetic they provide, which will be necessary if they are to be considered a form of art. Nevertheless, I disagree with Kirkpatrick in his insistence on the inability of video games to communicate meaning through their gameplay. The discussion up to this point should provide some evidence to the contrary. The problem seems to arise from a stringent separation between a game's fictional content and gameplay that in many cases is simply artificial. Whether the player chooses to acknowledge it or not, many games provide a fiction to motivate gameplay, even if the majority are thin and uninteresting. Instances in which the fiction disappears to yield pure mechanical routine are as rare as those in which the gameplay manages to perfectly convey the meaning of the narrative. Most of the time, games dance somewhere in the middle of these two extremes, with the gameplay informed by the fiction, yet not going very far to deepen our understanding of it. Of course the video games that qualify as art will be those that successfully integrate their gameplay into the development of other artistic elements such as the narrative and emotional engagement.

#### 2.4 Tolkien, Fairy Stories, Enchantment, and Recovery

While obviously limited in its intended application, J.R.R. Tolkien's essay "On Fairy Stories" provides a useful lens through which to analyze video games. The fact that Tolkien's brand of fantasy has had such a profound influence on the content of many video games adds even more interest to the comparison. Central to Tolkien's notion of fairy-stories is the idea of sub-creation. As a philologist he traces the idea back to the invention of adjectives. With the power to abstract the qualities of an object, one can redistribute them to other objects, inventing new form and thus becoming a sub-creator (compared to the creator of the world we live in). He

views sub-creation as fundamentally different from either representation or symbolic interpretation of the world. This power is essentially linked to the faculty of Imagination, allowing the formation of mental images of things not actually present. Imagination leads us to an important insight: “The achievement of the expression which gives (or seems to give) ‘the inner consistency of reality,’ is indeed another thing, or aspect, needing another name: Art, the operative link between Imagination and the final result, Sub-creation” (Tolkien). When this art is used in the formation of images not found in the primary world, Fantasy results, and it is just this quality of Fantasy that Tolkien believes makes it a higher, more pure form of art, thus potentially the most powerful.

One result of art is to create a sort of secondary belief in an imagined world. Next to Fantasy, Tolkien places Enchantment, the “elvish craft” of drama that generates primary belief in the imagined world, a real sense of presence indistinguishable from that felt in the real world. He elaborates, “Enchantment produces a secondary world into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside; but in its purity it is artistic in desire and purpose ... Uncorrupted, it does not seek delusion nor bewitchment and domination; it seeks shared enrichment, partners in making and delight, not slaves.” It is to the ideal of Enchantment that all human attempts at Fantasy aspire, yet can never quite reach. This power of granting experience in a created world grants art, and particularly Fantasy both its potency and value. Tolkien defines Recovery as a regaining of a clear view of “‘things as we are (or were) meant to see them’-as things apart from ourselves” (Tolkien). He points out that the world can become foggy with familiarity, and that the resulting triteness arises from our appropriation of it, from claiming that we know it. Sub-creation serves us by reminding us just how wrong we can be. The true value arises since “fairy-stories deal largely, or (the better ones) mainly, with simple

or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting” and as a result so eloquently denoted by Tolkien, “you will be warned that all you had (or knew) was dangerous and potent, not really effectively chained, free and wild; no more yours than they were you.” This concept offers a real, tangible benefit offered by art. It gives us a reason to value it deeply, as something more than entertainment, pleasure, or the expression of emotion. With this description Tolkien manages to convey something of that elusive significance attributed to art that disappears in paraphrase. If the immense popularity of Tolkien’s work carries any weight, then perhaps he is onto something.

Gordon Graham (2006) discusses a very similar concept, though from the view of a philosopher rather than an artist. In support of his theory of aesthetic cognitivism, he posits art as a form of understanding. Before going further, it will be worthwhile to point out the caveat noted by Graham that conceiving art as understanding should not make art subservient to any extractable truths it may contain. The actual experience of the art itself must remain necessary. With this point in mind, Graham illustrates how an artist may direct our thoughts, though not in the same manner as an argument, from one proposition to the next. Instead, he argues that the experience of art is an active engagement, no less so than thinking or calculating, demonstrated by the distinction between seeing and looking. By engaging the senses, an artist may guide the audience’s mind, emphasizing certain aspects of the experience with artistic tools as seen fit. This guidance is what the artist uses to eventually lead the audience to understanding. By this power, “Human beings have the ability to manipulate their experience imaginatively, and this is one of the ways in which they can bring it more sharply into focus and find greater significance in it” (Graham). This allows Graham to conclude, as does Tolkien, that art may be used to see reality afresh, even to be properly aware of it for the first time. He argues that the degree of

meaning or significance that we can discern within something is dependent on our capacity for imaginative interpretation. Art acts as a source of understanding by providing the imaginative apprehension of experience that we often lack.

In this last point, Graham appears to be missing a link between art and the understanding it provides; he attributes art with just too much agency for the model he adopts, though the correct amount of potency and significance. Art is not literally the source of understanding, rather it is found in the interpretation of the experience we gain from art. In a sense, art exaggerates meaning in order to make it more apparent. Therefore art functions as a tool to enhance the opportunity for understanding rather than offering understanding itself. Graham seems to have a sense of this distinction, though it is never stated in this way. When he claims that the unity of form and content matters in a work, but not the accuracy of representation in it, his statement makes sense only within the paradigm of art as an *opportunity* for understanding. He claims, “*War and Peace* is wrongly regarded as a record of the impact the Napoleonic Wars had on Russia, but not wrongly regarded as in part an image of the impact of war in general” (Graham). It seems we are not necessarily meant to actually learn anything about war from the novel, but rather develop the interpretive skill necessary to see war properly in this world. Thus art can only be aesthetically evaluated for the internal coherence between the form and content of its subject, not the truthfulness with which the concept is approached. Indeed he suggests the relation between art and experience of the real world only matters after the work’s artistic merits have been established. Graham wants us to “think about bringing art to the world, rather than checking art against the world” and provides an example for this practice: “what there is to be learned from Jane Austen in this regard is not to be obtained by seeing in Mr. Woodhouse bits of

real hypochondriacs, but seeing in real hypochondriacs aspects of Mr. Woodhouse. Our experience is not summarized in the character, but illuminated, perhaps awakened by it.”

This modified version of Graham’s view that art provides the opportunity to make interpretations and observations that can then be used in aiding our apprehension of meaning, and thus skillful interpretation of the real world, seems to differ from Tolkien’s view in one crucial respect despite their apparent similarity. Tolkien states, as cited above, that art allows us to see things as they are meant to be seen, that in being refreshed by art we are actually given a vision that is in some way more accurate than that we previously held. Graham only gives to art the ability to attend to an object more carefully, with the ability to extract more significance; he says nothing about the accuracy of the significance that may be drawn. Tolkien recounts, “It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine.” The stories did not teach him to attend more carefully to trees because they were artistically described, they taught him the wonder *of trees*, that is the wonder inherent to them whether he observes it or not. The comparison thus brings us to acknowledge not only the beautiful power of art, but its terrible power as well. Art carries the potential to be unspeakably dangerous. In addition to allowing us to regain wonder of the world, it may train us to perceive it aslant. It is in reference to this possibility that Tolkien discusses fallen art, why he describes elvish Enchantment as having not only skill, but purity, that Fantasy cannot achieve. One needn’t agree with Tolkien’s Christian terminology to see the point. Graham is right when he says that Macbeth’s description of life as a walking shadow does not necessarily have to be accurate, but if by the end of the play we don’t gain the ability to discern something true about despair from that speech, then the play has done us no real service. The implications of this insight are not only moral, they are aesthetic as well.

As Tolkien perceives, “creative desire is only cheated by counterfeits, whether the innocent but clumsy devices of the human dramatist, or the malevolent frauds of the magicians” (Tolkien). That is when the imagination engages with poor Fantasy, we can feel that something is missing. Art does not have to represent the world as it actually is, but unless it is carried out with extraordinary skill, art that does not lead us to an accurate renewed view of the real world will leave us with a bad taste in the mouth. This is why sentimentality, believability, and character motivation are critiqued. Art must be externally coherent in addition to having the inner consistency of reality. Both a Michael Bay film and a Shakespeare play provide the means for interpretive experience of the events of their plots, but only the latter truly satisfies us because it gives us an insight into the human condition that the former in its simplicity cannot hope to convey. Human beings are more complicated than all of the characters in *Transformers*, but not more so than Hamlet.

By this point, the manner in which I intend to apply these ideas to video games should be fairly clear. Tolkien’s explanation of how Fantasy creates a secondary world applies just as much to video games as it does to fairy-stories. In fact, some of the language he uses seems to make them the strongest possible medium for Fantasy: “At the heart of many man-made stories of the elves lies, open or concealed, pure or alloyed, the desire for a living, realized sub-creative art.” The aim of games is often exactly the realization of such a living world. The ideal is a working, breathing environment populated by characters that will respond realistically to the player. One common criticism against video games can here find a response. Games are often derided as power fantasies, giving the player the means to subjugate all others in the world of the game. On the contrary, seen in this light the designer does not create a world so that he and other players may become a god within it. Instead, it can be employed in the service of art, to renew our



appreciation of this world. Of course this is the ideal. The number of games that achieve this is depressingly small.

Tolkien does acknowledge the weaknesses inherent to Fantasy as an art form. That which makes it most powerful also makes it most difficult to perform successfully. The use of images outside the primary world can make achieving the “inner consistency of reality” a challenge. Cultivating secondary belief in a world in which elves live alongside men is difficult and will require more skill than generating belief in a more mundane setting, but with accompanying advantages. The depiction of friendship between the dwarf Gimli and the elf Legolas makes us attend to the idea of friendship more closely than does the one between the humans Aragorn and Boromir. Additionally, Tolkien believes literature to be the best medium for Fantasy. In visual arts, “the hand tends to outrun the mind, even overthrow it” often resulting in silliness or morbidity. The attempt to portray Fantasy in drama is even worse, for several reasons. First, the events in a drama are actually beheld, not imagined and are thus already a window into a secondary world. Introducing fantasy or magic requires a “tertiary world” which is often too much to sustain believability. Contributing to the problem is the inadequacy of stage effects to convey fantasy effectively. Tolkien is not of the opinion it would be impossible to stage a drama based on fantasy, but he finds it naturally at odds with a medium in which the actors are the instruments of the art. Fantasy in contrast makes the audience focus on things: trees, rivers, steel, love, and death. It would be interesting to hear Tolkien’s reaction to recent film, in which the potential for a believable depiction of Fantasy is achieved.

Regardless, video games seem to be able to rise above the problems Tolkien attributes to visual and dramatic arts. The pitfalls of using a visual medium for Fantasy seem in principle, and at least occasionally in practice, surmountable; some worlds which show the fantastic rather than

force players to imagine it remain believable. Moreover, the limitations of theater in terms of effects as well as emphasis on character over the fictional world are removed. In some respects, video games seem to have the potential to surpass even literature as a mode of Fantasy. When done with artistic intent, they come closer to making the creator and audience, in this case designer and player, “partners in making and delight,” the cited ideal of Enchantment, more than any other art form. The interactive nature of video games means that the player can enter the world in a far more literal sense than that allowed by literature. This has profound implications for the concept of recovery. In literature, the reader may experience the created world by proxy of a fictional character. In a game, the player experiences it as an agent in that world. The possibility for regaining the appreciation for say, the tranquility of a forest, only seems able to be augmented by the opportunity to explore the forest ourselves. Video games are experienced in a way that appears to lie somewhere between traditional art and reality. As a result, interaction with an artistic video game seems to hold tremendous potential for providing the opportunity for imaginative interpretation as described by Graham. Perhaps more than other mediums, video games offer the opportunity to undergo an experience, and thus to potentially gain both the skill needed to reflect on it as well as a better understanding of the experience itself as it exists in the real world.

#### Conclusion:

Although each of these methods of analyzing games suggests their artistic potential, it is upon the last that I will build my primary argument. Tolkien and Graham focus on the value of art rather than trying to define it. By outlining a schematic, specifically one related to embodiment as formulated by Merleau-Ponty, of how video games offer this benefit of

understanding or insight I hope to show that they too deserve to be taken seriously as artistic artifacts.

## Chapter Three

### The Video Game as Text

If video games are to be considered a form of art, then the degree to which a single game may be considered a text must be established. Several important issues must be resolved in delineating the object that actually becomes aesthetically investigated. First is Espen Aarseth's notion of the ergodic<sup>2</sup> text which requires "nontrivial" effort to traverse. The quality of games that allows this difficulty is interactivity, the fact that games require input from players. The interactivity of video games has led several theorists to apply Kendall Walton's distinction between work worlds and game worlds. Interactivity and ergodicity mean that the primary method of "reading" video games is different from traditional art, involving testing rules in addition to interpreting provided information. A distinction must be made between these different modes of interaction, which will prompt a discussion of immersion and engagement. Additionally, several authors have likened the playing of games to performance arts such as drama, with varying degrees of applicability and success. A clarification of these elements and methods of examination will reveal video games to be a new type of text, taking elements from established art forms as well as contributing novel components that call for unique methods of aesthetic interaction and evaluation.

#### 3.1 Ergodicity

In order to make a distinction from traditional media texts, Espen Aarseth (1997) introduces the idea of ergodicity, meaning that the reading of a text requires an active effort from the reader. The concept is meant to provide a point of contrast from traditional artworks that only

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<sup>2</sup> The term is unrelated to the physics or mathematics definition relating to statistics. It was formed from a combination of the Greek words *ergon* (work) and *hodos* (path).

require turning one's head or flipping a page, ignoring interpretive effort for the moment. Ergodic texts require the reader to participate in their construction. Aarseth initially introduced ergodicity to analyze cybertexts, but he also cites several works in other media with the same qualities. The concept has since been applied to video games which perhaps more than any other media require reader effort. He cites Ayn Rand's play *The Night of January 16<sup>th</sup>* in which the audience acts as a jury to choose one of two endings. However, video games go beyond merely involving the reader in the construction of the text, they can reject the reader completely; a player may lose the game. However, the meaning of this rejection must be considered carefully. In one sense, failure is one way of bringing the story to a coherent ending, and for some games failed attempts form an important part of the experience. Yet in other games failure results in a jarring sensation that makes the player feel as if the text has not been concluded. This distinction is one that has been cited to deny video games artistic potential. The quality of gameness does indeed fundamentally influence the way that a video game is experienced, but it does not tell the whole story. As will be seen, both the ludic, or game-like, and representational or fictional elements of video games, or to be more accurate the interaction between them, must be taken into consideration when considering their function as a text.

It is useful to compare ergodicity with the concept of challenge or difficulty. In a panel discussion at Georgia Tech (2010) game scholars Jesper Juul, Frank Lantz, and John Sharp discuss the challenges provided by video games and art. Challenge in traditional artworks arises from the difficulty of interpretation. Reading a James Joyce novel for example requires making complex connections within the text in addition to bringing in a substantial amount of outside knowledge and skill gained from reading other works in the tradition he draws from. Challenge in traditional games is of a related, but somewhat different sort. They can include both physical

and mental challenges. Sports and pinball require developed motor skills, whereas chess necessitates the formulation of strategies. Video games can involve game challenges of both types in addition to the challenge of interpretation, but it is the challenges of gameplay that create the ergodic quality that Aarseth describes.

On their own, the challenges of gameplay do not provide sufficient qualification for video games to be considered art without applying the designation to sports and other games, but they do contribute aesthetic qualities in a particular sense. Aaron Smuts makes a distinction between purposive and aesthetic sports (2005). He defines an aesthetic sport as “one in which the purpose cannot be specified independently of the manner of achieving it” and suggests these may be close enough to dance to be considered art forms. The movement of the athlete’s body provides a pleasing aesthetic experience. Similarly, he posits the elegance of a chess gambit as worthy of aesthetic consideration. Relatedly, at the Georgia Tech conference cited above Henry Lowood makes a distinction between beautiful and impressive play. A gymnast provides what might be called a beautiful performance for an average spectator. However, an observer who is also trained in gymnastics would be knowledgeable regarding the technical ability required to perform the routine and would thus have a different appreciation for the display. Lowood makes the distinction by comparing a remarkable dunk in basketball with a well-coordinated passing play. Only those familiar with the rules and strategy of basketball appreciate the second, but he still considers it an aesthetic quality. The skill required to perform such feats of impressive play may be compared to the concept of virtuosity in music or painting. Moreover, both types of displays can be extremely gratifying for the performer to carry out successfully.

Nevertheless, the presence of these aesthetic qualities in games and sports alone are not enough to warrant the designation of art. Worthwhile art uses these qualities such as beauty and

elegance as raw materials in order to create a cohesive expression of an idea or emotion. The display of virtuosity in itself may be aesthetic, but it is not artistic. For this reason, I do not consider fictionally simple, purely goal-oriented games like *Pac-Man* and the *Madden* football series, though they may be sources of immense enjoyment, to be works of art. Rather, the unique artistic potential of video games arises from their capability of combining the aesthetic properties elicited from both physical and mental challenges in tandem with representational elements in order to create new experiences. In addition to sound, visuals, and emotion video games open up the possibility of using challenge as a raw material in the construction of artistic objects. The description of video games as the aestheticization of the player's thought and action mentioned earlier again serves well to illustrate the significance of the artistic potential here. Games, challenges, and play, which already occupy an important part of human society, can now be harnessed to allow art to tap new areas of experience. There are also several reasons other than their representational content to consider video games for art status, but not games in general. First, a video game tangibly exists as an artifact as opposed to a set of rules like a sport as Smuts points out. Additionally, there is still an element of authorial control, even if not to the degree in other art forms. Again, the way that a video game manages to use the rules that govern play in order to make an artistic statement will be the object of aesthetic investigation.

A simple, common, yet effective method of using the ergodic qualities of the video game as an aesthetic element is well illustrated by the *Tomb Raider* (Eidos Interactive, 1996–2009) and *Uncharted* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2007-2012) series. In these games, the player takes control of Lara Croft and Nathan Drake respectively in order to explore ancient ruins in which danger never seems to be far away. In these sequences of gameplay, which borrow heavily from *Indiana Jones*, the player is often required to solve some type of puzzle, whether by

manipulating light beams in a room through the use of mirrors, activating a series of switches in the correct order, or arranging the arms of a statue into the correct configuration. Failure to accomplish these tasks can prevent the player-character from advancing or even result in death. Several of these scenes effectively communicate the emotions involved in the situation. Since the player is the one working out the puzzle, he or she shares in the frustration of the character in the event of being stumped. If the character is in danger and needs to complete the puzzle quickly, a sense of urgency will be transferred to the player. The player can enjoy a sense of personal satisfaction upon solving the puzzle rather than just a sympathetic one as might be expected from viewing *Indiana Jones*. Furthermore, these puzzle sequences can be more heavily incorporated into the representational content of the game. Perhaps the puzzle must be solved in order to prevent a comrade from being harmed or a villain from escaping. In addition to being a part of the narrative, the ergodic quality itself becomes a vehicle for an aesthetic experience that cannot be achieved in other media. By involving the player, these games allow for a different sort of appreciation than texts in which the reader is passive. Ergodicity does not necessarily imply aesthetic merit, but this is the type of interaction that makes video games a unique sort of text when it is used in the service of an artistic vision.

### 3.2 Work and Game Worlds

The explicit connection between art and play made by Kendall Walton in *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990) has naturally led a number of authors to apply his theory to video games. To give a simplified summary of his ideas, one begins with the idea that paintings and novels invite spectators to partake in the same sort of games of make-believe as dolls and toy trucks. Both require the participants to imaginatively engage with static objects in order to extract meaning, albeit art encourages much more sophisticated games with a higher level of authorial



control. All representational works are seen as proposing fictional truths that collectively designate a fictional world. Roughly, all of the fictional propositions explicitly made about a fictional world correspond to the “work world” and will remain constant for spectators who interact in normal, or, as Walton puts it, authorized ways with the text. However, the text will also generate a range of reactions that form another sort of world which will differ between spectators. Since these worlds are dependent on the game that each individual spectator plays with an artwork, he designates them as “game worlds.” The game world can host a number of types of fictional propositions regarding the artwork including details regarding the fictional world not made explicit and personal reactions to fictional events. For example, according to the work world of *Hamlet*, the title character stabs Polonius through a curtain. My particular game world might involve details such as the color of the curtain and my fictional surprise<sup>3</sup> at the event. The interactive nature of video games seems to be a logical reason to apply a theory of appreciation that emphasizes the role of the appreciator’s response to a text to the degree that Walton’s does.

The application of the idea of work and game worlds to video games has already yielded some interesting results. Tavinor has pointed out that each video game carries the potential for the generation of multiple work worlds (2005). The actions of the player alter the fictional truths contained within the text. The player’s role in formulating the text goes beyond even constructivist theories of art which claim that appreciators of an artwork construct the meaning. Subsequently these theories might be usefully expanded to apply to video games. In video games the player creates the work world by exploring, manipulating objects, and cultivating relationships, all of which contributes to the game world as well. The situation is similar to

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<sup>3</sup> Walton differentiates traditional emotions and those that occur in response to fiction, but the distinction is not necessary here.

childhood games of make-believe in which the work world is not defined until it is acted out. Tavinor uses this reasoning to assert that video games are a new form of fiction between games and traditional art that blurs the distinction between work and game worlds.

In a direct response to Tavinor, Aaron Meskin and Jon Robson (2009) compare video games to plays and other instance works to argue for retention of the idea of a clear boundary between work and game worlds. By their reasoning a performance, or instance, of a play creates its own work world just as the script provides its own work world. Game worlds may be generated through interaction with either, though the process of their creation will be different. Likewise a particular playing of a video game will generate its own work world and corresponding game world. They argue that in the course of play any emotional reactions of the player or unofficial knowledge of the fictional world remains rooted within the game world of the player. Therefore, the integrity of the work world as a fixed entity, at least for a particular performance, remains preserved.

This observation seems to be true, but in showing it they have masked what I believe Tavinor may have been aiming at in the first place. Video games do not so much blur the distinction between game and work worlds as lead to a new dynamic between the two. The game world influences the actions of the player by providing emotional or epistemic motivation. These actions in turn create the work world which serves to generate the player's game world. Unlike a traditional artwork, even a play, in which the work world is delivered to the appreciator who forms a game world, the creation of both is a mutually informing process in video games. This interdependency arises because the player acts as both performer and observer. Tavinor's insistence on viewing video games as a new type of fiction thus still holds, though to be fair, Meskin and Robson never dispute this point. A more useful line of investigation will likely arise

from considering the ways in which a game world may direct the crafting of a work world. We should ask how video games affect players and how the games are able to elicit certain actions from the players due to these effects. What aesthetic qualities unique to video games prompt players to take so much care in the manipulation of events in fictional worlds? Having given another unique quality of video game texts, the next section turns to the question of the demands of these objects.

### 3.3 “Reading” the Text

The analysis of video games as texts is complicated by the fact that the player must engage with them in several distinct ways in order to traverse a single text. These modes of interaction arise from the mixture of the ludic and representational parts of the game. Even under this umbrella distinction, the literature disagrees over which parts of these elements should be considered the primary part of the player’s experience. The case seems to be that the balance between types of interaction varies among video game genres as well as among games within them. I propose more interesting results can be extracted by considering the ways the different modes of interaction complement one another than by trying to assert one of them as primary.

Graeme Kirkpatrick emphasizes the ludic element heavily, asserting that the experience of playing a game consists mainly of working out rules as opposed to meanings or interpretations (2011). The player experiments with these rules by pushing against the fictional world in order to find out what parts of it are interactive. This type of play even goes so far as to suggest that the primary experience of play is not goal oriented, but rather closer to idea of free play, finding primary motivation in experimentation rather than completing objectives. He cites the definition of gameplay provided by Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen as the “game dynamics emerging from the

interplay between rules and game geography.” Kirkpatrick seems to agree that this process of interplay carries an epistemic quality, but denies space as the primary interactive element, instead choosing to focus on time and rhythm as has been discussed in the previous chapter. This type of interaction applies especially well when a player has just begun a game. The first few minutes of gameplay often involve experimenting with the controls in order to determine the abilities and limitations of the player-character. After this initial acclimatization, the challenges of the game could be viewed as a testing of the player to use the available tools in proscribed ways. Progression through the game requires gradually more skilled control or application of abilities in combination in order to meet new challenges, so that the player is constantly forced to reconsider what is possible, in other words, the rules of the game. This method of engagement accurately explains one type of play, especially in adventure games when exploration is a large part of the experience, but it does so at the expense of ignoring representational content completely. As such, focusing on only game rules remains an incomplete picture of the experience of playing video games.

Tavinor takes a step in trying to unify the ludic and representational elements of games by viewing rules as “fictional affordances,” or opportunities to act in the fictional world, that are constrained by the programming of the game (2006). He also frames these fictional affordances in terms of possibilities that are discovered during play, thus generating importance for an epistemology of the player-character. However, rather than limiting the knowledge gained to game rules, he explains how this dynamic allows a new way of interacting with representational content. Players actively uncover, explore, generate, and inhabit a fictional representation rather than observe it. He compares the overall experience to a childhood game of make-believe but with the addition of a visual and auditory representation. The idea of fictional affordances goes

further to explain a player's interaction with a game than considering abstract rules. One important result of this view allows a distinction between permissible and encouraged action within the fictional world. For example, the rules of a game may well permit the player-character to spin in circles while ignoring the surrounding fictional world instead of following a path to a goal designated by another character. Both activities are allowed by the rules in the game's programming, but only the consideration of fictional content can give a reason for the player to pursue one over the other (assuming both lead to enjoyable engagement). The concept of a fictional affordance gains even more weight when considering multiple options that make sense within the fiction of the game world. For example, the player may be offered the choice of siding with one of two characters in a conflict. The idea of testing the rules of the game does not provide a useful way of approaching this decision which will likely be made based primarily on the representational content of the game offered up to that point. Of course the choice could be further complicated by influencing the future course of gameplay by means of opening new areas for exploration or offering useful items to the player-character in addition to determining the evolution of the narrative. The ludic and fictional elements are tied together so that neither provides a motivation or explanation for player action on their own.

In addition to dividing focus between rules and fiction, Diane Carr shows that each of these two objects of attention can be interacted with in different ways by comparing immersion with engagement (2006). Carr describes immersion as being either perceptual or psychological. Perceptual immersion arises from being "sucked in" to the representational elements of the game, the story, visuals, music, or a sense of presence in the fictional world. It relies on the senses. In contrast, psychological immersion describes a situation in which the player is absorbed in the mental challenges of the game. Chess would be described as a psychologically immersive

game, but not a perceptually immersive one. Carr also identifies engagement as arising from less familiar or more difficult material that requires rereading or reconsidering information to make sense of it. Engagement also often calls for the use of external referents for interpretation. A complicated novel like *Ulysses* requires engagement. Part of the uniqueness of video games will be seen to lie in the way they can simultaneously immerse and engage, subtly shifting the emphasis placed on each. Carr argues that this shifting between types of interaction provides a primary pleasure of play. She shows that one method for tinkering with this dynamic lies in the level of difficulty of the game. As the player becomes more proficient with the game and control shifts from conscious effort to muscle memory, the challenge may be increased in order to maintain a sense of engagement or relaxed to allow more immersion. The same continuum operates in strategy games that require planning as opposed to reflexes.

Her discussion concludes with a combination of the states of immersion and engagement into the concept of flow, which hovers between the two. Flow is defined as “being in the zone,” a pleasurable state with high focus and motivation involving the extension of skill to cope with new challenges. The player performs both well and effortlessly. In this state the player can remain immersed in the representational content of the game, yet still devote attention to the challenges of gameplay. Carr’s description of flow may point to an explanation for the frequently cited effect of video games of causing a loss of the sensation of time. As opposed to other artworks which generally seem to pick a point on the balance between immersion and engagement and stay there, video games’ tendency to play with this dynamic requires a high degree of attention while managing to keep the experience fresh (at least successful games). The switching between modes of interaction may contribute to a sense of time passing quickly since

the player is not allowed to remain in one state for too long before a new challenge or representation is offered, demanding renewed attention.

This approach illuminates the experience of actually playing a video game well enough to warrant an extended application. In the Playstation 2 game *Devil May Cry* (Capcom, 2001), the player controls self-proclaimed demon hunter Dante who is himself half demon, granting him superhuman strength and speed. The game is best known for its extraordinary difficulty, at times seeming to require the player to exhibit the same superhuman reflexes as Dante, but it also possesses a distinct gothic aesthetic that is well-utilized. The architecture within the game world, music, narrative, and creature design share this gothic sensibility tying it all together<sup>4</sup>, yet the familiar subject matter remains fresh thanks to Dante's flamboyant responses to these elements. As in many other games, an opening movie establishes the identity of the primary characters and the ultimate goal to be achieved. The player is thus forced to interact with the game passively as an observer in the same way as a filmgoer. The movie is meant to immerse the player in the world and is straightforward enough to not require much engagement to interpret. When the player gains control, Dante is approaching a large castle full of traps, hidden switches, secret rooms, and before too long, hordes of demonic monsters. Part of the game involves a tense exploration of the castle, knowing that danger likely lurks around every corner. In sequences where enemies are absent, the gothic environment and music serve to immerse the player in the fictional world. The player is enticed to forge a path through the various passageways in search of the way forward. Since the layout of the castle itself is complicated, the process of exploration is also psychologically immersive, requiring proficient spatial memory if excessive backtracking is to be avoided. These segments of exploration and puzzle solving are interspersed with bouts of

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<sup>4</sup> See chapter 3 screenshots 1,2

frenetic combat that takes place in real time. The soundtrack shifts to heavy metal and the player is immediately snapped to attentiveness as even the weakest adversaries can prove deadly.

As the game progresses, the player gradually gains an intuitive control over Dante's movements. Simpler actions like dodging or jumping become reflexive, so the game allows Dante access to new weapons and abilities to master, all of which prove necessary to deal with the increasing strength, speed, and number of adversaries. During both types of gameplay the player may also pause the action in order to manage Dante's inventory and abilities in a menu. For example, the player gets to choose the order in which to unlock new abilities. The learning curve of the game is steep, but eventually a state of flow as described by Carr may be achieved. Transitioning between exploration, combat, and breezing through menus becomes natural and serves not to break up the experience but rather to tie it together. The process is pleasurable and extremely gratifying, particularly in combat when the player is suddenly able to easily dispatch enemies that once proved excessively challenging. Dante ceases to feel like a puppet that must be awkwardly manipulated, but instead, an extension of the player into the fictional world as complicated strings of movements become effortless. Additionally, more cut-scenes serve to further develop the narrative. The experience of playing the game depends on all of these elements, or more precisely, on their successful integration with one another. The challenges of gameplay and representational content support each other as both draw on different types of interaction. So while some games emphasize different parts, excessive focus on any one of them fails to capture the essence of the game.

### 3.4 Performance and Variability



Perhaps the best argument against considering a video game as a cohesive text lies in the variability in experiences afforded by the same game. This idea has led even some respected game designers to deny their own creations art status. For example, Hideo Kojima, creator of the acclaimed *Metal Gear Solid* series views interactivity as a limiting factor that prevents him from forcing a viewpoint on the player (2013). Instead he sees video games as a unique cultural form that brings art forms and interactivity together in a novel way. He has described games as a sort of museum for its artistic elements rather than a piece of art in its own right. Despite these limitations, there does seem to be a case to be made for video games to be considered texts that may be analyzed in a manner similar to the approach taken with traditional media.

In an attempt to deal with this issue, Tavinor compares video games to a written musical composition that must be interpretively performed in order to be perceived. Similarly, Kirkpatrick's idea of the game as a script for a dance sequence has been mentioned. Several authors in the literature have made a similar argument comparing video games to theater. A number of good reasons support this analogy. For one, the narrative of many games remains the same for every player. Even when this is not the case, differences might be considered small enough to be considered within the boundary of improvisation. Additionally, the idea of performance provides a meaningful context for viewing different play styles as expressions of the players. For instance, in *Devil May Cry*, it is possible to carry out the combat with a substantial amount of stylistic flair if the player so chooses<sup>5</sup>. To give an idea of the possibilities, a combination involving rushing in with Dante's sword extended for an opening blow, stepping back with an upward stroke to launch the enemy, firing a few pistol rounds into the airborne adversary, and equipping a flaming gauntlet while leaping upward before smashing the enemy

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<sup>5</sup> See screenshots 3, 4.

back to the ground is entirely doable; though perhaps it goes without saying that such a sequence requires some skill. Alternatively, the same enemy might be fought using only simple sword strokes with feet planted firmly on the ground. Choosing a point along this spectrum could be seen as an interpretive performance of the player.

However, a much more convincing argument for considering a game as a single text can be made from an adoption of Steve Swink's emphasis on the tactile, kinesthetic sense of manipulating a virtual object, or sense of control in a game as the primary mode of experience (2009). The arguments of the preceding section should make it clear that this description does not tell the whole story, but it does single in on one element of video games that will remain constant for different players. To extend the *Devil May Cry* example, the experience of controlling Dante will be the same for each player, barring minor differences such as preferences for melee or ranged attacks. Every player gets to feel the rush of his speed and the tight responsiveness of executing his flips and rolls. The sensation of extending oneself into the game through Dante is constant. Besides offering cohesion to the game, this sensation is an aesthetic quality unique to video games, meaning that we have homed in on another important topic to be considered in their evaluation. Of course, this is just a formalized version of an idea already familiar to experienced gamers, namely that a game's controls can have a profound effect on the way the game is experienced. A game with great gameplay ideas or an interesting narrative can be ruined by poor controls.

Despite the apparent successes of Swink's ideas in explaining the sensation of play and how it relates to the distinctive qualities of each game, they breeze over a number of complications. First, video games seem to offer somewhat more variability than different interpretations of a play, though this again depends heavily on both genre and individual games.

Action games such as *Devil May Cry* do in fact usually have a static story and force the player down a fairly linear path, meaning that the representational content differs very little between playthroughs, or individual runs through the game. At the other end of the spectrum, *Mass Effect 2*, a science fiction role-playing game (rpg), allows the player a significant amount of influence over the evolution of the narrative. The player may choose the course of the protagonist's romantic relationships or whether to follow certain orders from superiors. The survival of your squad members depends on your strategic acumen, as they can be permanently killed, profoundly influencing the rest of the narrative. The malleable narrative structure could make it difficult to treat the game as a single text rather than a collection of related ones.

A further problem arises when considering possible contradictions between the ludic and representational aspects of a game. Carr points out that character traits ascribed to the protagonist may or may not be supported by the player during gameplay. This fault may arise from both game design and purposeful player choice. She uses the example of Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* to illustrate the point. The fiction characterizes her as confident, aggressive, and methodical. However, nothing prevents the player from cautiously creeping through the game or running at the first sign of danger. This disconnect could present a problem for the cohesion of the fictional elements of the game and hence hamper a proper analysis of the character. Yet another issue can be found in the occurrence of multiple playable characters or the cases in which the player creates the protagonist. Here, even the feel of the controls described by Swink changes. For example, many fantasy role-playing games offer some variant of a warrior, thief, and mage as playable characters. Each possesses characteristic strengths and weaknesses meaning that they must each be played differently in order to be successful. Thus the fictional

content of the game may remain almost unchanged, while the gameplay becomes fundamentally different depending on the choice of character.

In an attempt to alleviate some of these issues Andrew Burns (2006) applies Janet Murray's and Walter Ong's comparisons of video games to oral narrative. Turning the criticism that video games usually present flat, archetypal characters on its head, Murray compares these characters to the mythological ones appearing in Homeric poetry (1997). She argues that in both cases a general character sketch is fleshed out by a particular instantiation or performance. In this case the dynamics of the text arise from the improvisation of the poet or player as they stitch together and adopt the basic formulae. The improvised performance is then evaluated by how well the ideas of the text are extracted and displayed. Walter Ong points out several more similarities between video games and oral narratives in addition to the stereotyped characters which he terms "heavy heroes" (2002). Both often carry an antagonistic tone, focusing on external conflict over interior struggles. They are aggregative rather than analytic, so that narrative sequences are added as opposed to being organized hierarchically. Lastly, they contain a high amount of repetition. None of this is to claim that the two media function in precisely the same way, but the comparison offers a few useful analytical tools. Burns uses these ideas to draw a few interesting conclusions. Viewing a video game as one particular telling of the myth of a heavy hero makes the text an event or performance rather than a fixed object. Playing the game is an iterative experience that relates many different text events depending on the input of the player. Thus aesthetic examinations must investigate not only how players engage with the game or interpret the images and narrative, but also how they imaginatively appropriate and remake them.

The comparison of video games to oral narrative gives us a way to account for much of the variability arising from the interactivity in video games but only by turning each game into a base for a collection of related texts rather than a single text itself. In practice, it is difficult to apply any of the comparisons of composition, drama, or improvised oral narrative to all games without running into problems. The former analogies seem to be adequate when the protagonist and most of the narrative is fixed, but in situations where the player has more control the latter concept appears more useful. Despite the issues, I tend to think that a video game can usually be considered a single text, even if I must bite the bullet and acknowledge this medium might require an extension of the term to allow more variability than might be expected for other artworks. This is not exactly an outlandish conclusion given that I have been stressing the importance of the combination of the ludic and representational elements of games. An interactive fiction will require a wider set of tools for a complete analysis than a traditional fiction. I have a few reasons for holding to the view of games as singular texts, which I will outline here. The argument will not be completed until the end of this paper.

My first reason for considering games as analogous to traditional texts is the comparison to plays in which a script and performance may each be evaluated as texts based on independent aesthetic criteria. The interactive qualities of games means that these criteria will be different than those for a script and the concept of performance would need to be extended to allow significantly more improvisation than is typically allowed for certain games. Nevertheless, the same basic relationship between the script/game and performance/playing remains. Considering a video game as a text outlining the possibilities for individual instances seems to make sense due to the constancy in embodiment, narrative, and emotion which are discussed in forthcoming chapters.

Another reason for considering games as cohesive texts is a topic that hasn't been discussed much yet: the consistency of the experience of the fictional worlds despite differences in the objects that populate them or the characters used to explore them. It should be noted that in this sense, a fictional world does not mean the same thing as in Walton's theory and does not correspond to a work world. Video game worlds usually have a distinctive character that can be identified even if the events within them differ. For example, the first person shooter (fps) *Borderlands* (2K Games, 2009) possesses an immediately recognizable bombastic visual style combined with absurd characters and caustic satire. The player can choose between several playable characters resulting in different gameplay styles as well as whether or not to assist the various screwballs populating planet Pandora with odd jobs in order to fill in the backstory of the plot. Despite the variables, the experience of trudging through the desert wasteland as a bounty hunter in search of treasure remains largely the same regardless of the player's choices. It consistently communicates the same sense of desolation, wildness, and cynicism rampant on Pandora. Since the potential for enjoyment offered by a game can depend heavily on its success in providing an interesting world for the player to inhabit (which *Borderlands* does), it makes sense to use the fictional world as a defining aesthetic characteristic. Indeed, video game critics will often discuss this point, which at least suggests that the fictional world is an important factor in determining the enjoyment a player might obtain from a game.

Additionally, the differences in fictional content afforded by a video game are all preprogrammed by the designers, meaning that within this variation there is, at least theoretically, a unified vision of how the fictional differences relate to the game as a whole. *Mass Effect 2* may possess a complicated branching narrative that can alter the experience of the game in significant ways, but each of those branches has been written in order to transmit calculated

aesthetic effects. The improvisation of the player is constrained. This level of control allows the maintenance of an aesthetic style if not of particular elements. To reapply Tavinor's idea of fictional affordances, their variety and number can be used as an indicator of the richness of the video game's fiction, offering another point of analysis for the game itself rather than a particular performance. Lastly, most of the art that goes into creating the game remains constant. The music, sound effects, environments, and character models do not differ even when the way they are interacted with do. Although these purely representational objects cannot be said to carry as much weight as the processes which combine them with gameplay, they do provide an important contribution to the overall experience of the game.

#### Conclusion:

Video games may therefore be considered aesthetic texts as long as a number of qualifications are kept in mind. Their inclusion of ergodicity and challenge means that both the method of engagement and material available for aesthetic manipulation require a specialized system of analysis for the extraction of meaning. The ability of video games to offer a collection of work worlds depending on the fictional affordances granted to the player necessitates that a recounting of specific fictional events cannot completely convey the experience of the game. Likewise, focusing on gameplay to the exclusion of representational elements removes much of the motivation for action. A video game comes together as a cohesive text by means of the combination of these two components in an aesthetically distinct manner. The analysis of *Devil May Cry* was meant to show how both fiction and gameplay contribute to the experience of the game which operates under several different, though overlapping modes. This combinatorial process of game and fiction grants a character that remains constant despite the variation

discussed in terms of performance and oral narrative even as it allows this variation to communicate individualized meaning to players.

We have thus seen some of the characteristics that differentiate video games from traditional media texts and discussed their implications. The experience of “reading” a video game was discovered to be a complex process involving several modes of interaction so that the risk of oversimplifying a game’s aesthetics remains a constant threat. These analyses have also begun to elucidate the aesthetic qualities of video games that can be used in their evaluation. This process will continue through a discussion of narrative and emotion in games.



## Chapter Four

### Embodiment, Immersion, Presence, and Identity Formation

In the following discussion of narrative and emotion in video games, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of the embodied consciousness will prove as a useful starting point. It provides a nuanced account of both traditional experience in the physical world as well as ways in which embodiment can be extended. Several authors have already applied Merleau-Ponty's description of embodiment to video game play, but they have usually avoided his insights regarding art. The present argument aims to show how Merleau-Ponty's conception of aesthetics lends itself particularly well to video games and supports the previously posited aesthetic value of vicarious experience discussed in chapter two.

#### 4.1: Merleau-Ponty's Embodiment and the Avatar

First, Merleau-Ponty's idea of the embodied consciousness must be elaborated. In response to Descartes's dualism as well as the contemporary treatment received from Merleau-Ponty's friend Jean-Paul Sartre, the mind and body are explained as inextricably linked. By rejecting "the idea of the body as an exterior manipulandum of an interior cogito" he avoids both idealism and materialism, instead establishing a philosophy of ambiguity (Kearney, 1994). Man is a body-subject who can only know himself in the world. Merleau-Ponty thus derides any form of abstraction that fails to take account of its grounding in the world; lived experience must always remain centralized. He makes this point clear in his critique of science as a second-order expression: "Science has not and never will have, by its nature, the same significance *qua* form of being as the world which we perceive, for the simple reason that it is a rationale or explanation of that world" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, cited in *Modern Movements*).

Importantly, Merleau-Ponty also avoids the trap of attributing everything to mechanical processes as can be seen in his discussion of Marx: “Thus Marx, not content to *be* the son of a lawyer and student of philosophy, *conceives* his own situation as that of a ‘lower middle class intellectual’ in the new perspective of the class struggle” (*Phenomenology of Perception*, cited in *Modern Movements*). Human experience depends on both corporeality and consciousness expressed in the unity of the body-subject. Therefore, any attempt at knowledge or insight must take account of this interweaving.

The ways in which playing a video game may be considered an embodied experience are several and varied. For example, Paul Martin (2012) argues that the avatar in a video game fulfills the dual roles of a tool that is both ready-to-hand and present-at-hand. In the latter case, the tool is an object of perception; its purpose is forgotten as the tool itself is the focus of attention. In the former case, the tool itself is forgotten as it is used in the completion of its intended task. As Martin elucidates, the “controller is a tool that is ready-to-hand as long as it is functioning correctly. But the avatar is more unusual. It is a tool through which the player perceives, manipulates and navigates through the game environment, but it is also an object of perception – often a particularly spectacular object of perception. It has a double existence.” This observation becomes significant in the context of Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the phenomenal body. Through the use of tools as means of perception, the phenomenal body extends beyond the physical body to include them. Merleau-Ponty offers the example of a blind person who uses a cane in order to perceive the world and argues that through this activity, the cane becomes a part of the phenomenological body. Martin points out that “Habit, therefore, is not understood simply as the acceleration of objective calculations necessary to complete a task but as a transformation of the task due to a change in the body’s attitude to the task, passing from the

objective to the phenomenal domain.” He argues that by using the avatar as a means of exploring the virtual world, it becomes incorporated into the player’s phenomenological body, therefore the player is also extended into what Martin calls play space in order to distinguish it from the virtual world of the game. He thus stops short of the claim that players identify with their avatars in an embodied sense, while still acknowledging their possible impact as a character that is present-at-hand as an object of analysis. To clarify, he offers an example: “It is similar to a person saying ‘I cut the cake,’ when they really mean ‘My knife cut the cake.’ This statement does not strictly speaking mean that the person *is* their knife, but that the knife has temporarily been incorporated into the person’s body.” The consistency of the cake is perceived only through the mediation of the knife, meaning that it has been incorporated into the sensory system.

Another way of looking at embodiment is as a means of presence, most simply put as a sense of ‘being there.’ However, taken in a literal sense, one is obviously not embodied in a game the same way as in the physical world. Bayliss (2007) elaborates when he points out “controlling a fictional American soldier taking part in the Normandy invasion...does not equate with them actually storming a beach in north western France.” Farrow and Iacovides (2013) locate this disconnect in the difference between embodiment and representation, stating that while playing video games “we tend not to care too much about dying and we do not experience pain through our avatar: these phenomena are experienced as representation, not as subjective experience.” In their view, deeper immersion comes not as a result of a sense of presence in the game world, but from the interface used to act within it becoming invisible. While their account of the physical effects of playing video games remains somewhat understated (leaning to the side while playing a driving simulator, jumping back in response to a horror game, and a quickening pulse during action sequences are all common physiological responses), it is true that players are

not physically embodied in the game world. Nevertheless, an application of Merleau-Ponty's ideas regarding art will show the level of embodiment achievable by video games more than sufficient to warrant aesthetic attention.

#### 4.2 Embodiment as a Method of Art Appreciation

Merleau-Ponty uses embodiment in order to describe the processes of both art creation and appreciation. Interaction with art from both sides depends on embodied, creative perception of an expanded notion of language. As a result of the nature of our experience as body-subjects, perception can never be characterized as passive reception of data. It depends on our interpretive reaction to stimulation of the body, a process he describes as aesthetic. Rather, perception already involves making sense of the world in our own way, using a 'perceptual intentionality' to create meaning. This individualized perception generates a sense of style for our view of the world, one that cannot be separated from the information which it characterizes. Additionally, the style of each embodied consciousness reveals its own unique mode of being in the world. This being is expressed through language, but Merleau-Ponty's use of this concept involves more than the everyday definition would imply. He distinguishes between spoken language, which includes written and oral word however they manifest, from speaking language. The latter type is often communicated by silence rather than precise exposition. Meaning is implicit and gradually accumulated, arising from the injection of the aforementioned style into what is said rather than the actual content of a message. The concept moves beyond formal language, incorporating gesture in addition to any other form of visual, auditory, or tactile expression. Merleau-Ponty discusses how the manner of a woman's walk can communicate a wealth of meaning without ever explicitly intending to. He offers a concrete example of the operation of speaking language in his discussion of the work of Stendahl. He describes how the author had

“decided what was visible and what was invisible, what was to be said and what was to remain unspoken. The desire to kill is thus not in the words at all. It is between them, in the hollows of space, time, and signification they mark out, as movement at the cinema is between the immobile images which follow one another.” (*Signs*, cited in *Modern Movements*).

The distinction between these two languages clarifies the role of art.

The unique power of art arises from its capability in communicating through speaking language. Thus it provides us with a “formal presentation of pre-objective modes of experience” (Kearney, 1994). Art speaks to human experience by taking advantage of a mode of communication that operates prior to the schism of the body-subject necessitated by the abstraction of spoken language. Since it does not depend on the conventions of spoken language, it may achieve a sort of “universal” applicability. This insight also explains the oft-quoted observation that art is not reducible to summary. Since art deals with primary experience, any attempt to abstract it into a purely linguistic form will result in the loss of the initial meaning. Music, painting, and gesture can therefore appeal to anyone, and spoken languages may be considered translatable insofar as they are all translations of this primary expression, or as Merleau-Ponty denotes it, the ‘aesthetic logos of the life-world.’ Nevertheless, the universality of this implicit language cannot be considered absolute since all of its speakers exist as unique body-subjects. Any expression of this “universal,” aesthetic language will bear the style of its speaker, the mark of the artist’s unique embodiment. Rather than an attempt at universal, abstracted truth, art celebrates and foregrounds the unique existence of its creator. Furthermore, each body-subject must respond differently to an artwork as a result of his or her unique embodiment. The artwork “articulates a particular *style* of expression which opens an horizon of

interpretive possibilities for reader or viewer” that is “determined as much by the audience’s recreation as by the author’s original creation” (Kearney). Merleau-Ponty’s framework thus accounts naturally for art’s ability to seemingly provide inarticulable truths that describe the world how it is while simultaneously allowing for varying levels of significance or relatability for individual appreciators.

Fictional artworks may provide access to the world of speaking language from two perspectives. First, the appreciator may act as an observer that empathizes with the characters. This is the usual mode of engagement with a film. Alternatively, the appreciator might identify with one or more characters, leading to an imaginative undergoing of the same experiences. It is here that video games contribute something new. By the extension of the phenomenological self into the game world, the player achieves what might be termed fictional embodiment. As has been stated, the player is obviously not embodied in the fictional world the same way as in the material world, but the processes of meaning making remain primarily the same. The only difference is that instead of reacting to perceptions received by means of physical tools, the player reacts to perceptions gained through the control of an avatar<sup>6</sup>.

Once a player has been fictionally embodied, the processes of imaginatively perceiving that world take on a degree of significance on par with those regarding the physical world. Perception in respect to fictional worlds still involves creativity or style in the process of constructing meaning. If the artwork truly taps into the realm of speaking language, then the meanings generated from being embodied within a fictional world will be applicable to the physical one. This transference of knowledge of course acts as one of the ways in which art can

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<sup>6</sup> Not all video games involve an avatar which the player directly controls; however, those that don’t more often fall closer to games in the conventional sense than those which I have been analyzing here from an artistic standpoint. One notable exception would be *Flower* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2009).

be enriching. Fiction allows the reader to obtain the benefits from experience of different places, time periods, or even completely fabricated worlds without physically undergoing anything. Perhaps more importantly though, art aims to make creative perception foregrounded by appealing to specific types of experience. For example, Merleau-Ponty claims, “The lived object is not rediscovered or constructed on the basis of the contributions of the senses; rather, it presents itself to us from the start as the center from which these contributions radiate. We see the depth, the smoothness, the softness, the hardness of objects; Cézanne even claimed that we see their odor” (Merleau-Ponty, “Cezanne’s Doubt”). According to Merleau-Ponty, Cezanne’s paintings force the viewer to see the objects in the painting in a new way, and this new perspective is meant to be applied beyond the world of the painting, or more succinctly, “To live in paintings is still to breathe the air of this world” (*Signs* cited in *Modern Movements*). The same process operates in at least some video games. Imagining oneself within a fictional world serves as one way of learning to appreciate this one. This result echoes the beneficial aspects of art lauded by Graham and Tolkien as presented in chapter two. Art not only provides insight, it prompts a restructuring of our method of perception.

Additionally, Merleau-Ponty views the cultivation of intersubjective relationships as an essential part in the formation of an authentic consciousness. The body-subject is continuously regenerated through a dialectical process of creative perception and being perceived, like a hand, says Merleau-Ponty, which can both touch and be touched. More than just presence in a fictional world, embodiment in the perspective of a fictional character allows the experience of these sorts of interactions, yet in a manner that attempts to focus on the implicit truths revealed by speaking language. Merleau-Ponty begins to allude to this type of engagement with such expressions as, “Through the action of culture, I take up my dwelling in lives which are not mine” (*Signs* cited in

*Modern Movements*). Just as two body-subjects will interact uniquely, each individual will react uniquely to the interactions with characters in a fiction. Furthermore, these interactions will be perceived interpretively, contributing to an individual's "style" which is creatively expressed in the physical world. One benefit of using fiction to complement 'real' relationships lies in the fact that fictional ones can simply be more varied. By encouraging the reader to imaginatively react to new situations, fiction helps to cultivate a more complete embodied consciousness, one that has had the chance to build itself upon a base of multiple types of experience. Merleau-Ponty's conception of the dialectical construction of the self is significant here. The body-subject will always reflect its own innate creativity, but this creativity is expressed in response to experience. Fiction allows interpretive perception of multiple perspectives, to probe our responses to situations normally unavailable, thus granting our creative expression more raw material to work with.

Not only do they offer the opportunity for more variety, but these relationships are boiled down to the most primal level; they provide a clearer glimpse into the aesthetic logos. The process of shaping one's body-subject usually happens subconsciously. Everyday situations do not usually prompt consideration of how our responses will shape our character. Art encourages contemplation of its impact on the reader. By focusing our attention on the speaking language beneath spoken language art forces a preoccupation with the process of meaning making. Great art has a large impact on who we become because it provides significant experiences in concentrated form. Merleau-Ponty seems to view this role of facilitating the construction of meaning as an essential part of legitimate art when he says there is "no art for pleasure's sake alone" (Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt"). The experiences provided by art, in other words, must change the appreciator. Another reason to consider fictional embodiment as a way of



interacting with art is that it forces the appreciator to be actively engaged. The possibility of passive reception is removed, so that the meanings created must relate directly to the reader, not merely by actively interpreting in the context of one's own consciousness, but by imaginatively undergoing the experiences. Merleau-Ponty argues an artist must "awaken the experiences which will make their idea take root in the consciousness of others. A successful work has the strange power to teach its own lesson" ("Cezanne's Doubt"). Again, being considered fictionally embodied seems to allow for the fullest application of Merleau-Ponty's theory. Undergoing an experience, in one form or another, should be the most efficient way of absorbing it into one's consciousness; lessons are better learned firsthand.

Of course for any of this to work, the fictional worlds that function as a setting for embodied action must be rich enough to allow for meaningful relationships, choices, emotional involvement, and insight. This qualification acts as a dividing line for artistic status for video games that on the surface level seem to offer similar experiences due to commonalities in the rules of play. Farrow and Iacovides pick up on this fact when they interview a player of the recent hit *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011):

I finally realized the problem I was having with *Skyrim*: It felt soulless. I may as well have killed Agnis and taken her stuff, because what did it matter whether she was there or not? I suspected that nothing I did would ever matter, and that has been my experience as I've progressed through the game. *Skyrim* is a huge world drawn with a level of detail that entices us to lose ourselves there, and is filled with things to do, enough to keep us occupied probably for years. But it also feels empty and pointless. (Scimea, 2011)

To be artistically valuable, a video game must attach meaning to the actions it permits and this quality remains separate from the entertainment value a game may provide. Fictional embodiment in novels and films has already proven to be profoundly enriching by cultivating empathy with fictional characters and situations. Video games have the potential to offer something new because they add action to the list of human qualities that are embodied when we enter a work of fiction. Although they remain skeptical of the level of immersion a video game may provide, Farrow and Iacovides end their paper with an affirmation of the value games might carry: “Instead of trying to replicate our day to day experience of embodiment, games provide a medium in which we are able to explore and extend our notions of what it means to be a human being that can act in both real and virtual worlds.” If video games ever come to be recognized as an established art form, it will not be by the basis in which they provide narrative and emotional engagement in the manner of traditional fiction, but by bringing our own choices and actions into the realm of aesthetic examination.

#### 4.3 Embodiment as the Value of Art

The concept of embodiment naturally complements the ideas regarding the value of art discussed in reference to Graham and Tolkien in chapter two. To summarize these views, Tolkien believes that art, and in particular Fantasy, can serve to aid in the recovery of wonder at the objects and workings of the natural world. Art should teach those who behold it something true about its subject. Graham sees art as a tool that sharpens our ability to meaningfully interpret the world. By seeing the subjects of art in life, we can apply similar interpretive methods to increase our understanding. Both concepts seem to lie near Merleau-Ponty’s idea of art providing access to the “life-world” experienced by embodied subjects. In his philosophy, perception and experience of the embodied subject are paramount and it is with reference to these that art can

enrich us. It allows us to see the ephemeral qualities of experience brought into focus while remaining true to their natural unabstracted form. Works that successfully tap into the life-world as it is really experienced by a particular subject will exhibit the benefits described by Tolkien and Graham. This approach attributes a significant value to art as something providing a real improvement to our lives, something deeper than aesthetic hedonism or unqualified expression of emotion.

The possibilities for achieving the results discussed by Graham and Tolkien seem to be greatest in the case of fictional embodiment. It approaches the ideal of elvish Enchantment described by Tolkien. If Fantasy is meant to reopen our eyes to this world through the use of another, then the more a reader feels like a part of that world, the more wondrous it should seem. Presence<sup>7</sup> in a fictional world will provide a stronger contrast to the natural world than observation of one, thus making differences all the more apparent so that the natural world can be seen afresh with more discerning eyes. Likewise, practicing meaningful interpretation in a fictional world in which one feels present is better training for doing the same in this world than analysis from the outside. From Merleau-Ponty we know that perception is embodied, so if observations of a fictional world are to be employed in the interpretation of the physical one, the more embodied one is when these observations are made, the better. Embodiment is therefore not necessarily the ideal of fiction, but it serves as a profoundly powerful tool for creating enriching art.

Before moving on it will be useful to elucidate the distinctions between video games, simulations, and role-playing in general. Role-playing may be undergone for a number of

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<sup>7</sup> Note this presence need not be the “illusion of nonmediation” as some have defined it. In fact a cognitive sense of presence will be more likely than a physical one, even though video games allow more access to the latter than other forms of fiction.

purposes, including entertainment and therapy. In each of these two cases there is undoubtedly an element of performance, suggesting it is at least related to art. Yet both cases also have a clearly defined primary purpose; the constraint on possible actions of the role arises from the goal that is meant to be achieved. These types of role-play may therefore be entertaining or useful for learning more about oneself, but to call them art seems a stretch. Video game role-playing, however, is constrained by the rules that the developer programs into the game, and for artistic games these can be arranged so that choosing specific actions in the context of the role will have predetermined effects that are meant to impact the player. Additionally, the activity is grounded within a fictionally robust representation so that the role-play is tied to aesthetic elements which the developer controls. By constricting the role-play to predetermined fictional possibilities, the set of those actions as well as their results can carry a meaning intended by the developer.

Gonzalo Frasca (2003) provides a useful distinction between simulation and narratives. Narratives are representational, they use audio-visual signals to describe. On the other hand simulations model behavior and generate signs according to those rules. Confusingly, a representation and the output of a simulation may appear identical to the senses despite different modes of creation. Fiction comes in the form of representations, whereas simulations are usually used for modeling a behavior in the physical world which is wished to be better understood. Frasca sees video games purely as simulations, but I would say that their full appreciation also necessitates focusing on parts that are purely representational and that calling video games simulations is actually misleading for reasons that will be elucidated below. Video games are thus simulational representations; they provide some static information in the form of

representations, such as cut-scenes, music, and dialogue in the context of a simulated world that behaves in such a way as to be responsive to the player.

Frasca points out though that even as simulations video games can convey the ideas of an auteur. He cites three levels at which simulations can communicate meaning. First, the representational qualities of the objects in the simulation can carry the same connotations as representational art. Next, the set of possible actions available to the player as a manipulator of the simulation can serve as a statement on a person's role in the world and what that entails. Restricting certain actions can draw attention to the ways we act in the physical world. Lastly, goal rules of the simulation, what must be done in order to win, encourage players to choose certain actions from those available. By making certain actions potent, the designer can posit a model of the way this world works, or perhaps create a world that noticeably differs from ours in order to explore the meaning behind that difference.

While these characteristics of simulations obviously have something to do with art as I have described it, I believe that to give video games this label mischaracterizes them. Simulations are meant to be experimented with; by tinkering with them we learn how a system responds to various stimuli. This certainly describes some of the ways in which games are played. In contrast art is concerned not so much with what happens in a particular circumstance, but why it arises and how it affects the lives of human beings. Interpreting a game is not the same as keeping a tally of the results of different experiments. Video games are structured in the same way as simulations, but engaged differently. Moreover, since video games so often include nonrealistic content, this begs the question of what exactly is being simulated. In fact, it is precisely because video games are not purely simulations that they are artistically interesting. Through their structure as fictions, video games can attain a level of organization and coherence

that real life does not, and this unity allows the communication of a message, an artistic insight. Video games are simulations of some aspects of life, like physics, sounds, and images (in some cases), but not the experience of these in precisely the same way that we are used to, for if they were, most games would probably be either too terrifying to play, or incredibly boring. They allow distilled, focused experiences that can be meaningfully interpreted upon their conclusion in comparison to those from this world. Video games present opportunities for fictional embodiment, not simulated experience, even if the qualities of video games discussed so far serve to bring these two practices closer than they have ever been before.

If video games can be shown to function in a manner similar to the fiction discussed in the formation of the concept of fictional embodiment, then a strong case will be made for both their legitimacy as art and a proper method of analyzing them. Video games can be evaluated for the extent to which they create a fictional world whose perception offers worthwhile insights into the life-world. The last two chapters have explored some of the ways in which video games differ from traditional fiction. If video games can achieve the goals presented here, and I believe that in some cases they do, the manner in which they do it will be unique, as has been repeatedly stressed. It now makes sense to turn to the question of how embodiment affects the playing of video games specifically and conversely, how video games induce embodiment.

#### 4.4: Tools for Strengthening Video Game Embodiment

The most obvious strategy for making embodiment in fictional worlds easier and more engrossing is by making the world more realistic. Shapiro, et al. (2006) usefully divide realism into sensory and abstract components. The general trend of commercial video games has been to focus on increasing visual and audio realism. This can help encourage players to see the

characters as more human, but it ends up being less important than the less tangible elements of realism. The agreement between a setting, character, or event as it is presented and our imagined predictions of what they would be like if they really existed does much more to allow immersion. Representations need to behave and interact realistically more than they need to appear life-like. This concept is similar to Tolkien's "inner consistency of reality" requirement of fantasy. Video game settings must have a clearly discernible internal logic. This type of realism is important because it influences the player's beliefs, behavior, and relationships with characters in the fictional world.

Gregersen and Grodal (2009) combine neurological science with embodiment to explore the ways in which video games can achieve embodiment. They see a person's physical embodiment as determining the extent of one's potential experiences, yet through mechanisms such as tool use the phenomenological body can be extended as described above. Associated with this body is a sense of agency and a sense of ownership of that body, corresponding to Merleau-Ponty's distinction between touching and being touched. Agency arises from successfully completing the chain of intending an action, issuing motor commands, and receiving proprioceptive feedback (sense of position of the body and effort of movement). By assuming the avatar as a tool in the virtual world, players extend the phenomenal body into it, gaining agency provided the game actually allows players to act. This is a far greater proviso than it may seem on the surface. For a true sense of agency, players must be able to accurately predict the outcomes of their actions, perform them in the manner they wish, and receive feedback regarding it, provided of course the player's skill is sufficient. Nothing causes a disconnect faster than the impression that a game is not obeying a player's commands. Conversely, games with intuitive controls that allow the player to act as intended without consciously thinking about it can usually

easily immerse the player. Gregersen and Grodal illustrate that a sense of agency may be further increased due to the tendency of observing other agents performing to activate our own motor systems. Seeing a virtual environment spin can make you dizzy, and looking over a fictional precipice can sometimes generate unease. Players can therefore feel something, admittedly a small shadow, of what their avatars do, thus strengthening bodily extension into the virtual world.

Although video games can be very adept at cultivating a sense of agency, they may be less so in the attempt of giving a sense of ownership of the body. Gregersen and Grodal point out that games must rely on audio-visual signals and primitive haptic feedback in the form of vibrating controllers to communicate being acted upon. This limits the types of actions that can be effectively felt by the player. This shortcoming in the operational mechanics of video games emphasizes the importance of my theory of fictional embodiment. Gregersen and Grodal's analysis focuses on the character as a tool or extension of the player, but my proposed method suggests taking on the perspective of that character within the fictional world. If this type of embodiment can be achieved through the types of realism and agency discussed above, then the player gains the ability to be imaginatively acted up. Granted this type of embodiment lacks the physicality of that associated with the real world, it retains many of the same qualities, particularly in terms of being the object of emotional action, which will be discussed more fully in chapter six.

To provide a short example of the way realism and agency affect games, a look at *Chrono Trigger* (Square, 1995) will serve useful. Faced with technological constraints on the level of graphical realism, the game uses sprites (2-D collections of pixels) as the vehicle for visual representation. Nevertheless, the style is consistent and thus avoids jarring the player into



awareness of the extension of the phenomenological body, even though the virtual world has only two dimensions. Beyond the level of graphical style, *Chrono Trigger* again serves as a prime example of keeping the logic of its world consistent, despite involving magic, monsters, incredible technology, and time travel. Far from ruining the player's engagement, these elements have led many to cite *Chrono Trigger* as one of the best rpg's ever created. *Chrono Trigger* achieves this inner consistency in a number of clever ways. Of particular interest to the present discussion is the time travel mechanic. Upon reaching a certain point in the storyline, the player becomes able to visit seven different time periods at will. As one example of generating consistency, situations that seem odd may sometimes be explained by events in earlier time periods, yet only become explained once the player reaches the point in the game that involves going back and performing the act that leads to that circumstance. Alternatively, the fictional world is home to a number of characters with whom it is not necessary to speak, but if the player does choose to engage them in conversation they often discuss the mythology of that world. The time travel also presents an interesting way of instituting agency. Actions in earlier eras will result in discernible effects in future ones, granting weight to every decision made. The player is forced to deal with the repercussions of his actions as they shape the fictional world. In addition to acting as an enjoyable gameplay mechanic that keeps play interesting, the time travel system adds to the artistic potential of the game. This unity of enjoyable play and aesthetic value is the ideal that video games should strive for.

Video games present yet another layer of embodiment beyond other types of fiction through kinesthesia, the sensation of motion. Ulf Wilhelmsson (2006) views the combination of bodily action and perception with cognitive capabilities as the necessary elements for an embodied ego. He argues that through the physical manipulation of a control interface, a player's

motor skills become embodied in a game world through a “game ego.” Although the mapping of motor control of a game character is obviously not 1:1, the kinesthesia experienced by the avatar can to a degree be transmitted to the player as has been mentioned. The motion of the virtual camera and appropriate use of sound effects can convey some of the sensations of locomotion. Haptic feedback such as controller vibration also contributes to deeper tactile embodiment. The ultimate aim of these immersive factors is to make the control interface transparent, so that motion in the game world becomes as reflexive as it is in the physical world.

One game franchise that successfully captures these kinaesthetic qualities is *Gran Turismo* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 1997-2013). With the professed goal of being an advanced driving simulator, *Gran Turismo* aims to capture the feel of automobile racing. The default perspective is from the driver’s seat, offering a realistic perspective of the graphically detailed racetracks as they whiz by. Famous for offering hundreds of cars to choose from, the developers tried to capture the feel of each car incorporated in the game, from the most mundane of street cars to advanced racing machines. It is easy to lose control of low-end cars, even at moderate speeds, while racecars noticeably hug the pavement and can make tighter turns. Special tires are required for sufficient control on snow or dirt roads. The game even allows for detailed modifications of a car’s engine, suspension, and drivetrain, all of which affect the way the car handles during races. Additionally, the game also supports an alternative controller consisting of a steering wheel, shifter, and pedals. The wheel provides force feedback during turns and the pedals are pressure sensitive. All of these elements of representation, vehicle management, and tactile control aim to create a driving experience as realistic as possible by likening the embodiment as a driver of the virtual car to the embodied experience of driving a real car as much as possible. The goal is kinesthetic rather than emotional or intellectual embodiment and in

this the game succeeds. Thundering down a straightaway offers an undeniable sense of speed and even with a normal controller one can feel the tension of rounding a sharp turn. These are sensations that for the most part cannot be offered by traditional art forms. By aestheticizing these experiences video games may blaze a new trail for artistic endeavor.

Wilhelmsson ends his argument by directing his ideas to a conclusion that elucidates the crucial difference between embodiment in traditional art and video games. Visuals, sounds, and emotional involvement are all heightened by the embodiment of the player's physical involvement in the game world through the controls. This insight opens up a deeper application of Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodiment to art than has previously been possible with other art forms. As Wilhelmsson points out, the experience of a player is fundamentally different from an adjacent bystander. These observations will inform the discussion of two artistic elements that video games share with other art forms, narrative and emotion.

#### 4.5: Character Identification and Self-Discovery

The embodiment capabilities of video games outlined above can thus clearly convey a wealth of knowledge regarding Merleau-Ponty's life-world. But furthermore, they offer a type of introspection unavailable in other fictions. This possibility exists in any game that offers significant choice, but is particularly apparent in rpg's, especially those that allow the player to create the main character. The manner of this introspection depends on the degree to which the player identifies with the protagonist. Martin's observation that the avatar acts as both tool and perceived object may be reformulated by considering the avatar as either a fictional representation of the player or a character with which the player identifies, the latter in both the sense of "I am such and such character" as well as "I can relate to said character." In practice,

each of these identifications intermingle and shift in emphasis depending on the demands of the game. This tension can be seen in an interview of a player of *Final Fantasy VII* (Squaresoft, 1997) conducted by Andrew Burns. In order to demonstrate the dual role of the avatar as tool and character, he points out that the player oscillates between saying “Cloud [the protagonist] did” and “I did” when asked to recount the events of the game’s narrative (Burns 2006). The slips correspond to instances of gameplay in which the player is granted more or less control, with stronger identification occurring during sequences of more involvement. Both types of interaction with the game can yield valuable aesthetic experiences.

First the effects of identifying with the avatar as an established character will be explored. In this situation, the player’s actions advance the avatar toward a goal, but the avatar is viewed as the one accomplishing the goal in the fictional world. The aesthetic experience revolving around the protagonist is based on empathy with him or her, by analyzing and relating to the experiences of the protagonist as a character, not the player as an actor. All of the tools of character development available to authors in traditional fiction are available to game designers and have no need of elaboration here, but designers can also tap the interactive role of the player. For instance, the effort required of a player can enhance empathy for the protagonist. In the case of an adventure game, the time commitment of the player required to traverse the terrain might transmit the sense of making the arduous journey felt by the character. Additionally, video games allow kinesthetic perceptions of a character by the means described above in addition to the audiovisual or textual descriptions also found in films and novels. The player can to a degree feel what the protagonist does rather than be told about it. This fact leads to the foregrounding of an aspect of human experience not previously available for aesthetic attention. The feeling of manipulating a character, determined by the responsiveness of the controls and kinesthesia,

forms one component of the perception of the character. Ideally, the controls should work in concert with the expressive elements of the game in characterization. For example, requiring complex controller manipulation from the player can reinforce the perception of the physical agility of the character. Conversely, a poor control scheme will draw attention away from the representational aspects of the game to the interface itself, stifling the opportunity for attaching meaning to the activity.

The ways that interactivity alters traditional methods of character identification also warrants attention. Tim Marsh (2006) describes the player's relation to a game's protagonist as vicarious experience. At its first level, the concept of vicarious experience coincides with the concept of fictional embodiment outlined above, but the nature of video games allows for the transmission of an even more powerful experience than an application of Merleau-Ponty's ideas to traditional art would suggest. Marsh outlines three ways in which the player's identification with the character strengthens perception, the activity around which Merleau-Ponty's notion of experience centers. Connections to the game environment, the emotions of other characters, and ideas about the protagonist held by other characters all gain significance with increasing identification. An examination of how the relations he points out might arise will demonstrate the implications of the new ground tread by video games.

First, the gaming environment ceases to be a backdrop for observed action and becomes the theater for the action of the player. Traversal of the game environment requires that perception of it be foregrounded as much as the characters within it, resulting in a shifting of emphasis away from the objects focused on by traditional fiction. Viewing a film involves focusing on the actions of a character as the environment is traversed; obstacles are perceived via the character's response to them. Video games refocus the attention on the environment itself so

that a strategy for action within it may be formulated. A perfect example can be found by considering a character that must solve a maze. A film might use cinematography and dialogue to try to communicate the method used by the character to escape. In contrast a video game requires the player to actually solve the maze, and to do this a mental map of the fictional space must be created, calling for a much higher degree of attention to the maze itself. This mode of interaction is much closer to our experience of the physical world in everyday life, meaning that video games generate a stronger embodiment with regard to space than other forms of fiction.

Next, identifying with a video game protagonist strengthens the emotional attachment to other characters in addition to revealing the disposition of the protagonist through the responses of the other characters. The chapter on emotion will deal with this issue much more extensively, but at this point it can be noted that the increased sense of involvement arises from reasons similar to those in the case of the environment. The player's action carries out the relationships between the protagonist and other characters so that the connection felt can potentially be stronger than one based on observation alone.

Besides adding these new dimensions to identification in the sense already familiar from literature and film, video games provide the means for a new sort of introspection as a result of embodiment. Traditional fiction prompts us to rethink our beliefs, to reconsider who we are. Video games do this as well, but they go beyond the stimulation of contemplation; they can require us to prove our beliefs through action. Mirjam Eladhari (2006) discusses this potential in reference to MMORPG's (massively multiplayer online role-playing game), but most of her observations apply to single player rpg's as well, with which I have much more experience and will thus focus my discussion upon. I plan to expand her arguments into the aesthetic domain. Many of these games allow the player to create the avatar to be controlled. Traits such as gender,

race, location of origin, and abilities within the game are chosen by the player. Eladhari distinguishes between players who create representations of themselves and those which are characters acted out by the player. The latter situation can involve cases in which the player consciously strives for a certain characterization and or allows the character to come alive naturally, in the same manner that the author of a novel might try to write a character. Both possibilities carry the experience of performance hybridized with the process of fictional embodiment described above, the difference being that instead of identifying with an established character, the player composes it through the course of play. Though not elaborated by Eladhari, this potential for choice can add a tremendous amount of richness to games with role-playing elements. By changing the disposition or morality of the protagonist, the aesthetic effect of a narrative and even its outcome may be profoundly altered. Experimenting with the different possibilities reveals the aesthetic effects of each element and can thus lead to more focused consideration. The choices also foreground themselves as well as their effects since they require the attention of the player. They draw the player deeper into the game world, strengthening embodiment within it.

Self-discovery arises when the player creates and plays a character based on him/herself. Eladhari claims this process can occur at three levels of immersion: avatar, in which the character is a puppet controlled as the player's representative in the game world; character, which is an extension or representation of the player's ego; and persona, or total identification of player and character, implying a degree of presence. Considering these gradations with respect to fictional embodiment means the stronger the immersion, the richer the aesthetic experience, resulting in deeper insight.

Eladhari also cites three methods of characterization available to the player. It should be noted that the differences between the virtual and physical worlds constrain characterization. Qualities may not be manifested the same way in both. In addition to stimulating creative ways of characterization, these limitations can illuminate the ways in which the player's culture also restricts expression. First is the creation of the character before entering the video game world by choosing traits such as those listed above. Basing a character off of oneself requires self-examination. Michelle Nephew (2006) sees character creation as an exercise in Freudian wish-fulfillment, suggesting that unconscious desires will manifest in differences between the character and player. The game becomes a power fantasy in which the player may violate social taboos. While there are several reasons to avoid simplifying video games to power fantasies as Nephew verges on doing (see for example Jesper Juul's *The Art of Failure*, 2013), these claims likely carry some weight. Examining one's own character from an aesthetic distance may therefore reveal previously unobserved qualities, especially when this examination is carried out after completing the game and possibly being changed by the experience.

The second method of characterization is the design of the gameplay framework, arising from the choice of in-game abilities available to the character. This is one area in which the player's traits will manifest differently based on the rules of the game; their representation may even be considered an aesthetic choice. For example, a reserved person might create a character whose abilities require staying near the fringe of the action of the game, or the opposite depending on if the player identifies with the character. Lastly, and most significantly with respect to the aesthetic experience, is characterization through the actions and development of the character in the video game world. When the events of the game are undergone without the intermediary lens of a fictional character, they are interpreted in a different manner. Rather than



relating to the character's reactions and forming a response to these, the player can react to the events firsthand. Both situations can be enriching. Being embodied as a character from whom we maintain cognitive distance allows us to see how that character reacts differently than we would, potentially allowing us to expand the emotional responses of which we are capable. Identifying with the embodied character allows us to test our reactions to situations that normally remain beyond our experience, perhaps allowing us to learn something new about the world as well as ourselves.

An example of this difference can be illustrated by *Mass Effect 2* (Electronic Arts, 2010). One of the game's missions requires the player to choose squad members for specific tasks based on the information that has been gathered about them up to that point. An inappropriate choice can result in the permanent death of a teammate, causing significant changes to the storyline. When one of my squad members died in the attempt to complete the task appointed by me, I felt personally responsible; I felt a deep sense of loss. The situation was worsened by the fact that my fondness for the character is what generated my confidence in his abilities. My relationship with him was formed by my reliance on him in previous missions and the pleasurable company he provided during them. The experience was moving not as a result of my empathizing with the sense of loss felt by protagonist as a character, but because I felt that loss firsthand. Video games can therefore prompt a new sort of aesthetic experience that leads to greater self-knowledge. Instead of asking us to imagine a response to a situation by identifying with a fictional character, they draw out the response itself through vicarious experience or embodiment. The development of my avatar in the game world coincided with my own development.

In addition to emotional growth, the actions taken by the player can evidence inner character. Eladhari cites Mckee (1997) who distinguishes between characterization, a list of

observable traits, and true character, or essential nature. She posits the latter is revealed through actions taken during stressful situations, which although perhaps not unrestrictedly true seems plausible. Traditional fiction allows us to imagine our response to these situations through empathy with the characters. Video games force us to act in these situations, and make the player face the consequences of these actions, all within a representational framework that promotes aesthetic examination. They allow us a glimpse of our true character rather than prompting a consideration of it. This framework provides a potentially very powerful tool for the exploration of morality, as will be seen when *Bioshock* is discussed with respect to emotions. In the words of Bartle (2003), “virtual worlds enable you to find out who you are by letting you be who you want to be.” Moreover, it is likely these intense situations often serve as pivotal points of identity formation, even when only experienced vicariously. Stress situations force people to adapt to meet them; likewise seeing how others react to them may influence our own behavior, and through it our phenomenological identity. Of course art has long been known to have lasting effects on appreciators, but by opening action as an aesthetic element a deeper and potentially more rewarding embodiment may be achieved, one that when utilized correctly more closely resembles unmediated human experience.

This last section has danced around a careful distinction that needs to be made explicit before the next chapters to avoid confusion. I will stand by my claim that video games allow the player to experience something similar to what the avatar does through fictional embodiment. However, this case is easy to overstate. Players are only fictionally, not physically, embodied and therefore the experiences taken in while playing a video game can be assimilated as personal experience after a fashion, but not in the same way that experiences in this world are. It is this distinction that creates the distance needed for aesthetic appreciation. The vicarious experiences

of a video game are bracketed off when play ceases. The result is that video games create a unique hybrid of personal experience and quasi-external events, so that players can reflect on their own feelings with the qualification that they were generated under a different embodiment. In a sense, players relate to their fictionally embodied selves as they might to a character in literature, but the interactive nature of video games means that what players can relate to has been expanded. The complete aesthetic experience related to video games is not just in undergoing the experience of fictional embodiment, but in interpreting that experience as well. This qualification must be kept in mind when reading the remainder of this paper.

#### Conclusion:

This chapter developed an extension of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theories of embodiment and art for an application to an aesthetic of video games. It has been argued that video games come closer to approximating the way we are embodied in the physical world than other forms of fiction, and that with this quality they gain access to a range of new properties that can be used aesthetically. Some of these include agency, kinesthesia, and enhanced or modulated character identification. The next two chapters explore how these affect narrative and emotion in games.

## Chapter Five

### Video Games and Narrative

This chapter will examine traditional ideas of narrative as they relate to video games as well as the ways that video games can be used in the creation of new types of narrative. The narrative elements of setting and character will also be considered. The discussion will involve the concept of fictional embodiment introduced in the last chapter as well as some ideas from chapter two. Lastly, it will be questioned whether video games need stories in order to be aesthetically significant fictions.

#### 5.1 Traditional Narrative and its Difficulties

An essay by Jesper Juul provides a sensible starting point for examining video games through the lens of traditional narrative (2005). He states three reasons that tempt players to view them in this way. First, human beings have a tendency to turn any sequence of events into a narrative when they are relayed to another person. This habit allows people to make sense of the world they live in. Similarly, a player's account of actions taken in a game will sound like a narrative. Whether the story will be a good one or even if it is a story will be examined below. Second, video games often feature a backstory that provides a dramatic impetus for play or they involve acting out an "ideal story" by completing the game, i.e. not losing. Lastly, video games share many elements with narrative, including quests, protagonists, and linear sequences of events. Many games offer these elements as either incentives or rewards for play, so that the game becomes the creation of a communicable story.

To elaborate Juul's points, one can look to the ways in which video games incorporate established forms of narrative. Before the proliferation of powerful graphics and sound

processors, much of the narrative content of games was delivered through text displayed in boxes overlaying the screen, and even in more recent games this system is used frequently. Drawing on the traditions of literature, this text provides any combination of descriptions from the viewpoint of a narrator, dialogue spoken by the characters, and choices directed at the player depending on the game. As technology has improved, narrative has increasingly moved to resemble the prioritization of the visual as in film by incorporating cut-scenes with voice acting. Taken together, these narrative elements of a game will form a cogent story that will in many cases be the same for every player. These stories may be received and analyzed with the same methods players develop through engagement with narratives in other media, particularly literature and film. So even excluding gameplay, video games offer narratives that compare with established art forms, or at least mass culture products. Granted, the narratives attached to many games are formulaic, cliché, predictable, and poorly written, there do seem to be a few game stories which when lifted out of the game remain compelling. Obviously this comes down somewhat to a matter of taste, but some recognizable examples might include *Final Fantasy X* (Square EA, 2001), *Bioshock*, and *Mass Effect*. Frankly, I believe this common conception of video game stories to be an unfortunate result of their portrayal in the media and the tendency of many vocal players to stick with popular games that emphasize mass appeal and take little risk. As with film many of the more experimental and interesting works perform poorly commercially, but in the case of games there is as yet no respectable group of critics outside the culture of gaming to bring attention to them. This paper is formulated in part as a response to this situation.

To return to the issue at hand, the problem with the above scheme of analyzing game narratives in isolation has already been stated, it ignores the aspect that defines video games, namely gameplay. To say that narratives in the form of literature or cinema come packaged with

video games says nothing of the potential for the games themselves to be considered artworks in their own right. As shown by Tavinor (2009), the nature of video games presents a number of challenges for the creation of compelling narratives. The fact that the accompanying narrative may often be ignored without affecting the mechanics of gameplay, illustrated by the ability to skip cut-scenes in many games, does not bode well for games as a narrative art. At a deeper level, there is reason to question the gameplay itself as a vehicle of narrative since it is carried out by the player rather than written by the author or designer. Juul situates this conflict in the distinction between story and discourse time. The former refers to the temporality of the story itself while the latter distinguishes the time of telling. In literature, the story is commonly related to discourse by the past tense; a series of events that have already happened is being related, although some literature also uses the present tense. Video games collapse these times into one, the playing time, so that the story is generated and relayed at the same time. Juul goes on to claim that interaction and narrative cannot occur at the same time, so that a recounting of actions taken in a game could constitute a narrative, but the actions themselves cannot. Another related problem results from the nature of our engagement with narrative as arising from a cognitive relation with a character. The absence of character in narrative would be a strange thing indeed, yet video games such as *Tetris* operate without them. The motivation for engagement comes from the evaluation of the player's performance rather than dramatic tension. This allows video games to be abstract in ways that narratives cannot while still demanding attention. A response to this dilemma requires a nuanced answer and will come at the end of the chapter.

Tavinor goes on to cite a host of problems that at least at first glance seem to be intrinsic to the medium of video games. With many games lasting several times the length of a typical feature film perhaps asking for a compelling narrative drawn out over that much time may be too

much to ask. In games where the narrative is only advanced between segments of gameplay, it risks being swallowed up by unrelated interactive portions. Conversely, games with a large amount of traditional storytelling are often derided as interactive movies, traitors to the medium. Striking a balance here is a difficult task that few developers seem to have been able to master. Even worse than being unrelated to the narrative, elements of gameplay can flatly conflict with it. Tavinor offers the example of *Uncharted* which in the cut-scenes paints protagonist Nathan Drake as a sympathetic, compassionate character only to force the player to kill literally hundreds of people over the course of the game. Additionally, the ability to lose a video game means that death loses much of its narrative potential, while being forced to replay difficult sections can ruin the narrative progression, focusing attention on the purely ludic elements of the game at the expense of the narrative.

Even the capability of a video game to provide a single story cannot be unqualifiedly assumed. Rather than providing access to one fictional world with details filled in by different readers, games offer a cluster of worlds explored during cycles of death and replaying that may differ among players. The possibility of multiple work worlds, to use the parlance of Walton discussed earlier, presents several difficulties. Subtle treatment of human experience, the core of artistically worthwhile narrative<sup>8</sup>, is thought to require precise control. Offering players more choice means that the designer has less control over the experience, making nuanced communication difficult. Linear sequences of gameplay that might allow for subtlety are often criticized for removing the fun from the game. A related problem is that even though static elements of the narrative such as those presented in cut-scenes may be interpreted for a correct

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<sup>8</sup> The value of art that I have put forth, namely that it teaches us something about our perception of the world in the ways I have suggested based on the theories of Graham and Tolkien, requires narratives to deal with aspects of human experience in such a way that they say something about it that goes beyond platitude.

view, gameplay perhaps cannot be subjected to this type of interpretation. One cannot assume the actions of the player will contribute to the narrative intended by the designer.

Despite these numerous setbacks, Tavinor does not see the situation as hopeless. He denotes two strategies that have been used to relieve the tension between narrative and gameplay. The first is to use gameplay itself as a means of exposition. Tavinor cites revealing of the narrative through the epistemic actions of the player-character as a particularly effective formula. This style approximates traditional first-person narratives and can allow tight scripting of gameplay while still directly involving the character and keeping the player emotionally invested. The first-person shooter *Bioshock* undoubtedly provides one of the most successful applications of this style. Control is never wrested from the player except for one sequence which turns this change into a narrative tool. Instead of offering narrative to be received passively, the player must explore the city of Rapture for clues that will help to piece together the tragic events that have occurred. The game is highly linear, but clever design and the drive to collect diaries and notes left behind by the denizens of Rapture, not to mention ammunition and medical kits, creates a sense of exploration rather than funneling. A large portion of the exposition depends on the player actively seeking it out, and when discovered, it does not disrupt gameplay. The narrative is contained within the environment. Finding the discarded belongings of the former citizens, seeing the propaganda signs, and dealing with the deformed monsters that remain in the dilapidated ruins of the once spectacular Rapture allow the player to piece together what has happened. Although it presents an effective solution to the separation of narrative and gameplay, it should be noted that this format might work well in only a few genres, including first-person shooters and action/adventure games.



Alternatively, the narrative itself could be made interactive, that is responsive to the input of the player. *Mass Effect*, which has already been discussed at length, presents a popular example. The overarching narrative remains similar for all players, but the attitude held in response to narrative events is determined by the player and some major plot points are variable. Compelling narratives may be crafted, but offering choice means that the designer must pay ample attention to the development of multiple storylines to ensure players' decisions remain significant. An important subdivision of this second option can be defined as the emergent narrative, a schematic used frequently in Western (that is American and European, not relating to cowboys) role-playing games (rpg's). In these games, the narrative is constructed through the completion of a number of quests that can be attempted in an order determined by the player. By choosing which tasks to complete and when, the player is given the power of characterization over the protagonist, but as a trade-off for integrating the development of the character into any individual narrative chunk. *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* fits this paradigm. The game contains a main quest that must be completed in a fairly determined order, but most time in the game is spent in activities only tangentially related to it. These side missions create self-contained narratives, but saying that they contribute to a cohesive arc for a particular player is a stretch.

Tavinor thus addresses perhaps the greatest obstacle to video games approaching traditional narratives which lies in the tension between story and gameplay, yet a number of problems remain to be resolved. I will attempt to offer solutions to at least a few of these. The integration of gameplay and narrative make Juul's distinction between story and discourse time somewhat of a moot point. It is true that the stories in games are not told to the player in a manner identical to traditional fiction, but then again, games are not traditional fictions. Even when applied to other narratives such as staged plays, the temporal distinction does not seem to

carry the weight it does with pure literature. Admittedly, perhaps a better way to think of a player's engagement with a game story could be better captured by the phrasing of experiencing it rather than reading it or being told. This language comes closer to evoking the concept of embodiment which I have argued provides the best way to aesthetically examine video games. It might be argued to drop the term "narrative" to emphasize the player's active role in the events of the game, but since games draw so much from traditional fiction it makes sense to continue to make use of the term narrative in the usual sense.

As far as the length of video games goes, there does not seem to be an inherent contradiction between long and compelling works, even if this combination is difficult to attain. *Don Quixote* and *The Brothers Karamazov* should dispel this illusion. The more pressing problem is in fashioning gameplay that holds narrative significance so that the story is not lost during purely ludic elements. Very long games do tend to include large segments without significant narrative advancement; they have a lot of filler. For example, even though I have cited *Final Fantasy X* as having an exemplary story, the frequent random battles with monsters don't really advance the plot beyond the ways discussed in chapter one and in fact occupy a high percentage of the total time spent playing the game. The proliferation of independent games with narratives that can be completed in only a few hours may be a response to this tension. Gameplay that actually contradicts the tone of the narrative presents a somewhat more difficult conundrum, mostly because it cannot be fully controlled by the designer. First, addressing this issue means that the designer must be attuned to the controls offered to the player. Actions that result in a break from immersion must be restricted without the player noticing. The illusion of choice must be preserved, and this is a difficult goal to attain, one that contributes to both the aesthetic merit and enjoyment of the game. Additionally, writers must be less concerned with spectacle than

with artistic impact. Game equivalents of summer popcorn films are already ubiquitous and doing nothing to convince anyone of the artistic value of games. Designers often use the excuse of overbearing market pressures in avoiding complex issues in games. For games to be considered legitimate art designers need aesthetic freedom; hopefully increasing critical attention will encourage it.

Video games have illustrated a number of clever ways of dealing with death as it relates to the narrative. I have already mentioned the framing devices used in *Bioshock* and *Prince of Persia*, but these options don't really change the effect of dying in the game, the player must still redo the previous section until succeeding. One alternative is known as perma-death. In games with this feature, death takes on the significance it holds in any other narrative form. Perma-death can be used with reference to either the player-character or supporting characters. A genre known as roguelike games, named after the 1980 hit *Rogue* (Toy and Wichman, 1980), involve randomly generated settings and death for the player is permanent. Failure means that the player must entirely restart the game, except each time environments, items, and enemies will be different. The overarching narrative of the game may remain the same, but these differences create a novel experience with each new game or death. A more interesting take on the concept of perma-death can be found in the *Fire Emblem* (Nintendo, 1990-2012) series. In these strategy games the player does not control a single protagonist, but rather oversees an entire team. If characters die in the course of gameplay, then the story continues without them. This means that interactions between characters that serve to flesh out the plot, provide characterization, or relay important information may simply never occur if the player isn't protective of every character. Losing characters early in the game will also make the ending substantially more difficult since they cannot be replaced. The difficulty of these games prevents a mainstream following outside

Japan, but they offer the type of creative solutions to video game narratives that warrants aesthetic examination. At the other end of the difficulty spectrum lies *Heavy Rain* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2010), a mystery game which is impossible to lose. The game's narrative adapts based on the input of the player so that the outcome of the murder mystery depends on choices made throughout the game. *Heavy Rain* incorporates perma-death in the same way *Fire Emblem* does, but even if every character is killed the player doesn't lose. The story will be finished based on the decisions of the player up to that point. None of this is to say that games with the more common option of restarting from a checkpoint can't have meaningful death, but these few games offer a hint of the possibilities open to games for those creative and diligent enough to pursue them.

Responses to the problems cited as results of video games having multiple work worlds should follow naturally from the investigations made so far. Tying the narrative into the gameplay means that the latter can be used to communicate reasonably complex ideas, and when this method fails, small doses of video or text are not disastrous if they preserve the embodiment of the player (or at least not break it for too long), remain engaging, and avoid contradicting the events of gameplay. In addition, Tavinor's claim that gameplay cannot be interpreted in the same way as static narrative elements is only partially true. Static elements can be examined for their intended impact on the rest of the narrative or as indicators of character motivation, but if players choose the course of an event, analysis becomes more difficult. Different players may interpret characters differently and thus have them act differently, or the same action may be chosen for different reasons by different players. For example, in *Mass Effect 2*, the player may choose to either salvage or destroy a dangerous, yet potentially useful piece of alien technology. The decision to destroy it might be prompted by either a commitment to independence or a distrust of

the authority figure who suggests saving it. There is no “correct” interpretation. Just because the motivation is different for each player, however, does not mean that each player cannot examine the actions he or she individually takes over the course of the game in relation to the narrative. Interpretations may not be universal, but at the local level they are still valid. At this point, a single video game becomes a collection of narratives.

This situation calls for a revised set of aesthetic criteria. In addition to judging the narrative that arises from a particular playing of a game, one can also consider the richness or variety of all the narratives offered. If one is to utilize the analytical techniques developed in other fields of study, then constant attention to their level of applicability is needed. The discussion of narrative in the familiar sense has thus revealed that this concept covers several distinct levels of storytelling within video games.

## 5.2 Narratives Specific to Video Games

The next logical step is to enumerate and analyze the levels of narrative within video games, paying special attention to any ways in which they differ from traditional forms of art. Diane Carr (“Games and Narrative,” 2006) puts forth a useful schema for analyzing video game narratives with an application to the role-playing game *Baldur’s Gate* (Black Isle Studios, 1998). She divides narratives in the same way as Juul by separating the story, or what happens; discourse, or how the story is told; and existents, such as characters, items, or setting. One important result of this paradigm is the possibility for different narratives to be constructed from the same story by changing the discourse. For example, Hans Christian Anderson’s fairytale “The Little Mermaid” differs from Disney’s animated film interpretation even though they might be considered to tell a similar story and use many of the same existents. Additionally, a story can

be perceived only after it has been instantiated by a particular discourse. Applying this terminology to video games one sees that many games provide a single story with an associated grouping of narratives, at least in cases in which the player lacks significant control over the plot. Gameplay shapes the narrative by manipulating the existents uniquely for each instantiation of play. Carr uses an example from *Baldur's Gate* to illustrate the point. Consider a quest in which the player is tasked with rescuing a teammate who has been captured and imprisoned by an adversary. Each time the game is played, the amount of time taken to complete the quest, the path taken through the dungeon, and the spoils discovered can differ. Nonetheless, the basic event of “the protagonist rescued a teammate” remains the same; the narrative changes but the story stays constant.

As a result of Carr's paradigm, the player simultaneously becomes the reader of the story and the author of the narrative, with the balance between the two shifting based on the current mode of engagement with the game. Furthermore, several methods for both types of involvement exist. For instance the player can receive the story by means of reading text, watching cut-scenes, or observing the results of his or her own actions. On the other hand, the player can generate the narrative by selecting options from a menu or directly manipulating the fictional world. The result is that players are offered not only a number of perspectives on the story, but different types of perspectives as well. Perspective can jump between characters, to a disembodied observer, to “godlike” control over large groups. Carr posits the opportunity for varied engagement as the reason for video games being so absorbing. The experience doesn't become tedious because it is constantly changing.

The distinction between story and narrative leads logically into Barry Atkins's comparison of video games to folk tales (2003). He argues that as in folk tales, much of the

pleasure from video game narratives results not from learning whether the protagonist will succeed, for this is a bygone conclusion, but how that success is brought about. The sophistication of the discourse, not the story, provides the satisfaction. Implicit in Atkins model is the assumption that video game stories are simple and formulaic, which although may be common, is by my estimation not always the case. Atkins compares skilled gameplay to a “well-turned phrase or the elegant sentence,” thereby placing the onus of good storytelling on the player. However, exactly what this burden means needs to be clarified. We should not forget, Atkins warns, just how heavily scripted many video games are. Nevertheless, video game narratives are unique in offering the illusion of choice. The fiction becomes satisfying when the designer is able to maintain real authorship while seeming to surrender it to the player. This mechanic operates by the designer dividing up main goals into numerous simple objectives, each of which constitutes its own miniature narrative. The player is rewarded for successful completion of these objectives with a replacement task. For example, a player might be informed to find a way to enter the next room only to be greeted with another challenge on the other side of the door. Good game design boils down to providing opportunities for the player to narrate the provided story in interesting, enjoyable ways. The player’s burden of storytelling therefore becomes partly a matter of creativity in using the tools provided by the designer in interesting ways, and partly a matter of skill. Players who are both creative and skillful hold the opportunity to perform impressive actions and subsequently generate engaging narratives.

When one of these miniature narratives is executed particularly well, Henry Jenkins denotes it as a “memorable moment” (2005). According to Jenkins, they arise when the player feels compelled to interact naturally with the game, that is, when action does not feel scripted. Unsurprisingly, this situation closely resembles the state of flow as described by Carr denoted in

chapter three. Gameplay that comes naturally can be executed well and thus leads to greater enjoyment. Game design giant Shigeru Miyamoto (cited Jenkins 2005) of *Mario* and *Legend of Zelda* fame speaks of something like this when he claims to build games around verbs. He aims to create a virtual space that both facilitates and thwarts the action while simultaneously granting it a dramatic context so that it gains narrative and aesthetic significance. These actions which make up Atkins's miniature narratives can then be strung together to create a cohesive experience. The cycles of challenge and success generate a rhythm that characterizes the particular game and player, exactly as explained in chapter two through the analysis of Kirkpatrick's work. The real art of video game narratives will thus be found in memorable moments rather than the story or character development on their own (even though these may possess merit in their own right). The sensibility of this claim should be immediately apparent to even modestly experienced players. The flashes of greatest enjoyment when playing video games come when performing impressive actions, either in regard to their representation, skill level, or dramatic impact. The idea of memorable moments situates the crux of video game fictions' artistic potential squarely in that which makes them unique- their interactivity. The elements of traditional narrative become the means to creating a meaningful environment for this new type of narrative to arise. Further justification may be gleaned from the fact that memorable moments make up the bulk of the discussion when players compare gaming experiences. It should be noted that most of the examples I have provided have been derived from my own particularly memorable instances of gameplay. The prevalence of YouTube videos showcasing segments of impressive play also supports this interpretation.

Video game narratives therefore become a sort of performance. The game designer provides the outline of a script and the player is encouraged to improvise within that framework.



The analogy to performance, however, goes deeper than a superficial similarity. As in the performance arts such as music and theater, the performer obtains a fundamentally different aesthetic experience from a work than an observer. When performing a difficult piece, the concept of challenge is placed within an aesthetic framework. Successfully overcoming the challenge results in an aesthetically pleasing performance. The active nature of the performer's engagement with the work necessitates focus, drawing attention to details an observer may likely miss. Furthermore, there is a sense of accomplishment upon completion. None of this is felt by the observer of the performance, yet anything that alters the way with which an artwork is engaged seems aesthetically significant. The situation with regard to video games is remarkably similar. Watching a skilled player execute an impressive bit of gameplay can be an entertaining spectacle, but it falls far short of the satisfaction from actually performing the action, especially when in a dramatic context. Listening to someone else speed through arpeggios is somewhat entertaining; pulling them off yourself in the middle of a complicated song is sublime.

Importantly, video games differ from traditional performances by providing feedback or evaluation of the player. This takes many forms. A game could keep a numerical score, grant bonus items, prevent access to a new area until a challenge is complete, or simply end itself if the player fails. A theater script won't give an actor a "game over" message upon butchering a line (unless we count being pelted by rotten fruit by an angry audience). Even though the game allows improvisation, it evaluates some "tellings" of the narrative as better than others, where winning the game equates to a successful, if not the best, one. This puts narratives that end with player failure in a peculiar position. On the one hand they represent "incorrect" versions of the story, but on the other they make up an important part of the overall experience of the game and do in fact provide coherent endings. Additionally, it means there is a requisite amount of player

proficiency required to experience the entire story. In actuality, knowledge of the game world and player skill are both built up incrementally over the course of repeated failure. Even though the protagonist cannot recall previous attempts, the player is meant to. Each separate try becomes subsumed into the memorable moment that results from eventual success. The nature of the failures (Were you too slow? Did you lose at the same place every time?) characterizes the overall experience of the game. Navigating an ancient temple full of traps in *Tomb Raider* after several deaths reveal their locations is a feat of both physical and mental agility that emphasizes these traits in Lara.

On a related note, the improvisation available to players allows what Atkins denotes as subversive reading, or gameplay that goes against the intent of the author. For example, one might choose to traverse an entire level (segmented gameplay area) by having the character walk backward. Video game fictions are the only ones that allow this sort of subversion without descending to meaninglessness. In fact, Atkins rightfully realizes a certain degree of subversion is encouraged by designers. Bonus items are often hidden in out of the way places, striking a random wall might collapse it to reveal a secret, or seemingly nonsensical sequences of actions could yield unexpected results. The player can gain a great deal of satisfaction from successfully completing these optional sub-narratives because it demonstrates skill. They serve as a reminder of the game component of video games by providing a basis for competition, either with the game itself or other players, all while remaining in the context of a narrative. It is undeniably a game, but it is just as surely more than that.

We have now traced several differences between video games and traditional fiction in addition to discovering criteria for their evaluation. A single video game story allows an assortment of narratives that can be examined for fictional richness, variety, skill required, and

attachment to the gameplay. Memorable moments of gameplay provide the building blocks from which an overall aesthetic experience can be constructed. Improvised gameplay is a performance, but video games themselves are no passive observers, forcing a benchmark of proficiency. Lastly, failed or subversive readings are not actually prohibited at all, but rather contribute to the variety and enjoyment of the video game as both game and narrative.

### 5.3 Fictional Worlds and Embodiment

One important element of any narrative is the world in which it takes place. Here, the fictional world refers to the setting as well as associated histories, mythologies, or mystical qualities. The fictional world takes on particular significance with regard to video games because unlike in other narratives, it functions not just as a backdrop for the action, but as an object with which player must actively engage. The structure of the game environment profoundly shapes the experience of play as can be seen from the observations of Atkins and Miyamoto. James Harold (2010) goes so far as to make the case for valuing fictional worlds as objects distinct from the fictions that contain them. For one, the world can exhibit aesthetic qualities that the work itself lacks, such as of being rich, elegant, cohesive, or mythic. Additionally, appreciators often find great pleasure in learning about fictional worlds, even when the information has no immediate bearing on the narrative. Solving puzzles or deducing unstated information regarding the world offers a different way of engaging with the fiction. Harold cites Aristotle's (*Poetics*) claim that we get pleasure from the recognition of, and learning from, representations in support of this observation. We delight in learning what a thing is. Fictional worlds, however, command an epistemic value that Harold does not pursue which can be seen by applying the thought of Tolkien and Graham from the last chapter. Many important features of fictional worlds will give transferable knowledge applicable in this one, such as regarding emotion, relationships, or

morality. The peculiarities of the fictional world help bring features of our world into focus. Moreover, imagining oneself in the fictional world results in a different aesthetic perspective. Images in the world may be aesthetically evaluated in their own right rather than as a symbol that is meant to carry meaning to our world. We also get to see our own world from an outside perspective.

The ability to directly act within the fictional world in the case of video games grants these benefits particular power. The way this capability shapes the engagement with the fictional world yields several significant results. The potential for movement leads Tavinor (2009) to classify games as visuo-spatial fictions. Much of the enjoyment of certain types of video games arises from exploration of the environment for the simple reason that many game environments are interesting and beautiful in their own right. The corrupted version of Wonderland in *Alice: Madness Returns* (Electronic Arts, 2011) provides an excellent example of the former whereas Gran Pulse of *Final Fantasy XIII* (Square Enix, 2010) is more directly beautiful in its representation of an alien wilderness. Fascination with these environments prompts players toward exploration for its own sake. On a deeper level, a variety of methods are often given to the player for investigating the history, culture, and workings of the fictional world. Players can often speak with ordinary denizens of their own accord, seek out informative manuscripts, or complete optional objectives to be rewarded with additional exposition. This situation differs from the traditional fiction discussed by Harold because in video games the player is directly responsible for the amount of information available for analysis. The information gathered gains significance because the player has worked to obtain it.

Furthermore, the fictional world is not merely observed as in literature, but experienced through fictional embodiment. As a result, all of the benefits of analyzing fictional worlds are

intensified. Tolkien might speak of regaining an appreciation for trees from a description of a forest in a book, yet getting to explore the forest yourself within a video game can provide at least as powerful an experience. The same holds true for any part of the world given new garments within a fiction, including nature, social patterns, love, and death. This power grants video games one of their strongest claims to art. They hold the potential to provide experiences that enrich players by allowing them to reevaluate their view of the world while going beyond simulation to place these experiences in an aesthetic framework so that we can learn something about them.

Another related result of embodiment in video games is the intensification of narrative impact that arises from active participation within it. Janet Murray (1997) cites immersion and a sense of meaningful agency as elements of video games that make narrative pleasures deeper and more compelling. When the player's actions "increase our belief in the solidity and consistency of the illusory world" they can contribute to the narrative meaningfully (Journet, 2007). By meaningfully integrating these actions, the events of the game are assimilated as personal experience rather than an observed story in the traditional sense. Subsequently, even seemingly banal activities take on significance not just as dramatic devices, but as personal action for which the player is accountable. Game narratives that when translated to other fictional media would prove exceedingly boring therefore become surprisingly engaging. The emotional impact of each narrative is intensified so that the story as a whole feels richly complete.

To be fair though, several authors have pointed out limitations for the types of stories that video games can tell while remaining interesting. Dovey and Kennedy (2006) argue that the focus on the action in games comes at the expense of character and plot development by ignoring the interior life of the characters. As a result, certain types of narrative are better suited for video

games than others. They suggest many games favor flat characters whose involvement with the plot is not emotional, but rather consists of exploring the world, solving problems, or competing with an enemy, that is, dealing with interesting objects in a concrete environment. For example, they cite *Sherlock Holmes* and *Harry Potter* as possessing narratives closer to those appropriate to video games than *Hamlet* or a Dostoevsky novel. Similarly, Atkins cites the depiction of situations with “close calls” as ideal for video games since they foreground the importance of human agency; they allow for the illusion of control.

At least some games seem to fair better with character development than these arguments might suggest, even if on the whole, narratives featuring the external usually work better. For example, *Final Fantasy VIII* (Squaresoft, 1999) gives the player access to the protagonist’s thoughts by displaying grayed-out text in dialogue boxes to differentiate it from spoken dialogue between characters. The player is thus provided with an interpretation of the events he helps to bring about. Squall’s [the protagonist] thoughts often question the utility or reasoning of the actions ordered by his superiors and the viewpoints of his friends. The game thus goes beyond having the players merely act out the actions of the story, providing them with an interpretation of those events which encourages players to form their own. *Final Fantasy VIII* not only provides the benefits of embodiment within a fictional world, but actively aims to aestheticize players’ engagement with it by encouraging reflection. In a related manner, in *Tales of Xillia* (Namco Bandai Games, 2013) the player may periodically choose to view “skits,” short snippets of conversation between the characters that serve to develop their backstories and relationships as well as to provide commentary on the events of the story. Most are no longer than a minute or so in length, so they don’t break the rhythm of playing the game, and since they are optional the player isn’t laden with any more exposition than proves interesting. Additionally, they actually

tie into gameplay since some skits provide motivation to complete sub-narratives that might otherwise be missed. Granted, both mechanisms rely on passive reception of exposition rather than gameplay, they demonstrate the existence of clever ways of overcoming the limitations of action-centric narratives.

On a related note, Dovey and Kennedy argue that the fantasy genre is often characterized by the detailed realization of an imaginative world at the expense of narrative tension, character development, and relationship formation. These narratives place the emphasis on things to the detriment of people and ideas, or so the criticism goes. There is definitely a degree of truth in this criticism, especially with regard to mass marketed works of genre fiction, but there doesn't seem to be an inherent contradiction between fantasy and emotional depth or subtlety. Striking a successful balance between description of the fictional world and fleshing out the characters may be difficult, but should by no means be impossible.

Tolkien's theory of Fantasy again sheds some light on the situation. The insight gained from great art need not be new or especially deep; it only needs to lead to the recovery of an important view. The point is not to target the most complex issues of our experience, but instead to remind us of the significance embedded within everyday life, that what we thought we understood really has much more to offer. In skillful fantasy, the pains taken to describe fictional worlds are meant to aid in fostering awareness of this one. The real subject of fantasy is not the fantastic, but the everyday. Still, the concept of everyday subjects needs to be clarified. Fantasy deals with the timeless, the elements of human experience that remain the same across time, place, and culture, as opposed to the focus on elements of contemporary society found in realist fiction. But as Tolkien asks, which is actually more real, a tree or a lamppost? Since everything else is different in fantasy, it draws our attention to the aspects of life that remain constant such

as emotion and relationships, even when these may be expressed differently across culture. I suspect that much of the current disdain for fantasy as an art form has arisen from the complete conquest of the scientific, materialist worldview. Under the impression that we have mastered the secrets of nature and so-called simple ideas (love is after all nothing no more than the activity of pheromones on the brain), we look to the art that addresses them with condescension. This attitude demonstrates that fantasy as Tolkien describes it may be needed now more than ever. Video games may help to revive this form of art that in recent times has fallen into disrepute. Precisely what makes many video games interesting is that they center on activities that are either fantastic or not widely accessible. When placed in unfamiliar situations, humans naturally reach out for what is familiar, so video games can share the tendency of fantasy to draw attention to the most basic parts of existence. Once attention has been thus directed, we become receptive to comment on that which we normally take for granted. This may manifest in video games in ways as simple as being forced to consider how to move effectively, communicate effectively within a restricted framework, or actually be aware of an environment. This does not imply that fantasy is the best art form, but it does illustrate that it can potentially avoid reducing everyday existence to mechanical processes devoid of wonder.

To rein the discussion back in a bit, it will be useful to consider Atkins's concept of realism as it applies to video games which he elucidates with an analysis of *Half-Life* (Sierra Entertainment, 1998). He consistently stresses the idea that the principles of gameplay interfere with the cultivation of realism in the usual sense. For one, the rules of the game necessitate the existence of virtual props that ruin the sensibility of the narrative. In *Half-Life*, the environment includes a number of destructible crates housing ammunition and first aid kits in places where it would not make much logical sense to find them. Similarly, the destructibility of the



environment which on its surface claims to strengthen immersion might be seen as merely an opportunity for spectacle, encouraging the use of heavy artillery to blow holes in the wall for no reason other than the satisfaction of watching it. Attempts at realism such as this, argues Atkins, don't serve to replicate reality in any straightforward sense; rather, they help formulate a specific sort of realism within the limits of the game. All of the actions a character in the narrative might realistically take are not available to the player. What this realism actually boils down to is that the rules of the game appeal to common sense, meaning that the actions required of the player feel natural; the player can use real world observations to formulate strategies for acting in the game. This conception of realism agrees with that discussed last chapter as a consistency of behavior of the fictional world. This realism means that the player need not be told what to do, but can be directed by the internal logic of the text. The result is that narratives generated by video game play are mimetic rather than diegetic; they show rather than tell. The emphasis on mimesis means that the player is free to draw conclusions and assign significance as seen fit from actions that arise from the illusion of player freedom.

The most important conclusion to take away from Atkins's observations is the fact that the realism of video games does not lead them to be confused with reality. One result is that there is not much reason to believe players would act the same way as their characters are played if presented with identical situations. Of course this is true. Most people if placed within the world of a video game would turn and run without a second thought, and rightfully so. On the surface, this may seem to present a problem for the theory of fictional embodiment that has been advocated. However, it is precisely because video games are not pure simulations that they hold artistic potential. Life lacks the organization required to create a cohesive piece of art, yet "game-fiction offers up apparent disorganization while nonetheless remaining readable in a

satisfying way” (Atkins). If a game simulated life perfectly, then there would be no reason to believe it could say anything more than living normally. Video games simulate some aspects of life and place those simulations within aesthetic frameworks that can attach a message to that simulation, providing a degree of organization and cohesion that real life lacks. But the idea that we don’t mistake games for reality is just a rephrasing of Aristotle’s observation that the observer of a tragedy must acknowledge it as fictional in order to achieve catharsis. Action within video games is undertaken by a *fictionally* embodied player. The player is not required to actually undergo the experience of the character, but to imaginatively undergo it. More realistic simulations of experience only serve to make this imagination easier. Even so, video games sometimes can act as reasonable analogues of experience when it comes to emotion. The degree to which this is true depends on the degree to which the player is fictionally embodied, which is a function of the immersiveness of the game as well as of the willingness of the player to willingly enter the fictional world. Successful completion of *Half-Life* does not mean the player would be able to navigate the alien-infested military compound that serves as the setting, but the apprehension felt by the player before entering a new room can reasonably be assumed to be a realistic response in the straightforward sense, in type if not degree. Of course one might argue that any emotion in response to fiction, whether in literature or film, isn’t “real” since its object doesn’t exist in the straightforward sense. The degree of embodiment which video games achieve through agency, kinesthesia, etc., however, appears to lead to a more visceral response to fiction than other media. Fictional embodiment thereby remains a valid means of interpreting video game narratives.

#### 5.4 Characters in Video Games

Although much has been said regarding this topic in the previous two chapters, a quick recap of those ideas in the context of narrative should tease out a bit more. First, there is no simple explanation that encompasses all of the levels at which a player may identify with the avatar in various games and the ways in which this identification changes over time within the same game. When the avatar serves as a blank fictional proxy for the player to act within the fictional world, then the narrative may be imaginatively appropriated as personal experience. During expositional sequences in games which wrest control from the player, traditional methods of character interpretation grounded in literature and film become the dominant form of engagement. The most common scenario, however, seems to be a mix of these in which the player goes through cycles of identification with the avatar based on the demands of gameplay. Here the player often mixes the self and the protagonist as the subject of declarative sentences recounting the narratives of a game. Events are viewed as happening to a character, but carried out by the player or vice versa so that the experience of the protagonist and player only sometimes overlap, sometimes providing direct access to the impact of narrative events and sometimes requiring interpretation or empathy with a character. The mode that predominates will be dependent on both genre and particular games. For example first-person shooters make the player's view of the fictional world coincide with the protagonist's, who is often not heavily developed, fostering a higher degree of identification. In contrast, many Japanese rpg's grant control of an ensemble cast and feature substantial exposition, shifting the emphasis to actions carried out by the group, thus requiring a somewhat more interpretive engagement.

Regardless of the specifics of fictional embodiment or identification, character development comes from two sources, the static story of the game and the sub-narratives that constitute gameplay. Characterization of the first type might be delivered by text, spoken

dialogue, or cut-scenes and again relies on the interpretive methods of traditional fiction. The far more interesting points arise when considering gameplay as characterization of the avatar, and when the player's actions affect other characters. The player's freedom of action potentially leads to contradictions with the characterization established by a game's story, a form of subversive gameplay. This may be seen as a weakness of game narratives, but by applying the ideas of oral narrative and heavy heroes the same possibility can generate subtlety in otherwise relatively flat characters. A player's reluctance to be violent in the game can be interpreted as moral complexity of the character. One important requirement for this type of narrative formation is that the player is responsible for generating meaning to an even greater degree than in normal gameplay. By making a conscious decision to play subversively, the player actively expresses meaning that he has chosen through gameplay as opposed to using approved actions.

Game designers may draw on several methods to fuse character development to gameplay. First, the actions the player is permitted to perform using a particular character constitute that character's approach to problem solving. The methods which are open to meet the demands of gameplay can also reveal personality traits. For instance in *God of War* which was mentioned earlier, most of the attacks the player can use to dispatch protagonist Kratos's enemies are extraordinarily violent, even gratuitously so. More than offering mere spectacle, though they certainly do that too, these actions emphasize the rage that drives Kratos on his quest to avenge himself against Ares and his ruthlessness in the face of anyone that stands in the way. The controls of the game constrain action so that it contributes to meaningful narrative. Another option involves shepherding the player into the creation of controlled sub-narratives. One particularly memorable scene occurs at the beginning of *Ninja Gaiden 3* (Tecmo Koei, 2012) when the player is forced to execute a foot soldier who has just seen his squad being killed and

attempts to beg for his life. The player cannot advance until the soldier is killed which involves repeated button presses and controller vibration as protagonist Ryu's katana gradually slices through. The controls and haptic feedback aim to communicate the feeling of cutting someone down. The information the sub-narrative attempts to convey resembles that in *God of War*, namely ruthlessness toward enemies although here driven by discipline rather than rage, but the scripting of the event allows for a subtler approach, such as the use of the voice-acted pleas for mercy, at the cost of wresting some control from the player. A more controlled segment like this allows a more nuanced treatment of the action. Restricting the actions of the player in this way allows developers to make sure certain events become a part of the narrative so that they may be commented upon. This graphic depiction, which should disturb the player, allows the developers to illustrate something of the complexity that arises when a trained assassin who has vowed to protect someone encounters members of a terrorist organization. Ryu takes no pleasure in the execution, so forcing the player to carry out the action unwillingly may communicate Ryu's own misgiving. Both methods of development can effectively characterize, with each having instances that better suit their use.

To examine one last option, one can consider gameplay as a method to reveal traditional narrative that depends on the action of the player. The branching story of *Mass Effect* would be one example of this technique. Here the characterization of the protagonist is carried out mainly through dialogue and cut-scenes, but the player's actions determine which combination of prepared material is used. Player-directed character development need not be so grandiose though. In fact small flashes of fixed characterization often seem more natural and do less to disrupt gameplay. The skits in *Tales of Xillia* often serve as rewards for completing optional goals, so even though the miniature narratives stay the same, they still require the action of the

player to be realized. In the same game, party members have the option of “linking” during battle so that they fight in tandem, protecting each other and gaining access to dual attacks. If two characters are linked at the end of a battle, the game will display a short interaction between them as they acknowledge the victory. The exchanges allow a glimpse of the way the characters interact between sequences of formal plot development and give a sense of the gradually tightening bond among the team. However, these conversations only occur if the player utilizes the linking mechanic and only between characters the player chooses. The gameplay remains a central part in constructing video game narratives and developing the characters within them.

### 5.5 Is Narrative a Necessary Component for Games to be Considered Art?

This analysis has shown that the unique qualities of video games can be used for the construction of meaningful narratives. These narratives carry the same type of value as other fictions, the communication of perspectives that allow for a renewed, wider, more attentive view of the world even as they grant it differently. Up to this point, the paper as a whole has focused on video games as fictions, and this chapter specifically on how gameplay and story can complement each other to generate meaning. But what about games that don't feature any story or characters in the traditional sense? Can the playing of sports games, *Tetris*, racers, or multiplayer first-person shooters be considered aesthetic experiences? It should be kept in mind that what is under investigation is not whether these games contain art, as the character models and environments in most of these games obviously demonstrate artistic talent, but whether the experience of the game as a whole has any artistic worth.

It might be argued that sports games and competitive shooters while lacking stories nevertheless allow for the kinesthetic sub-narratives that have been discussed. On the surface

there does not seem to be a significant difference between narratives of the form “Lara escaped from a tiger by jumping onto a ledge and proceeded through a small tunnel to the next cavern” in *Tomb Raider* and “The quarterback threw the football to the wide receiver who completed the pass and ran for a touchdown” in a *Madden* game. The latter narrative can be engaging, cultivate an interest in the outcome, and produce emotions of anxiety. But then again, so can physically playing football. The difference is that a narrative of a football play carries no meaning without being placed within a deeper context. The sub-narratives of *Tomb Raider* are tied together by an overarching story that grants them a context; each one plays a part in bringing together the game as a cohesive whole. In a sports game there is nothing tying together the player’s actions other than the game itself, they point to nothing beyond the competition. Like other trans-medial games such as computer chess or backgammon which are sensibly excluded from the discussion of video games as art, sports video games only offer virtual versions of pure games. Players may feel embodied, but this embodiment does not allow for the transmission of any experience other than competition, which on its own can be significant in its own right, but not in an aesthetic sense.

Another challenging case arises from the consideration of games in which the player does not take control of an avatar at all. Some examples include *Tetris*, *Angry Birds*, and *Flower*. Interestingly, the first two seem to be universally accepted as games in a straightforward sense. Almost no one seriously contends *Tetris* is a work of art, whereas *Flower* has become somewhat of a rallying point for gamers who wish their pastime to be recognized as art. The mechanics of *Tetris* will be assumed to be familiar to the reader. In *Flower*, the game begins with the camera focused on a single petal floating on the wind. The game offers no instructions other than to “Press any button,” which causes the wind to blow and propel the petal forward. Tilting the

motion-sensing controller changes the direction of the wind. The player eventually discovers that directing the wind through the flowers scattered around the meadow results in an accumulation of petals. As the petals are directed around the meadow, more flowers spring up and the meadow gradually grows greener. Upon reaching a lone, dead tree in the center of the meadow, the petals circle around it as it comes to life until in a flash of light a wave of green emanates from the tree, granting new life to the meadow. The screen then cuts to a city apartment window sill on which a lone potted flower blooms. Enlivening different flower fields is represented by the accumulation of flowers in the apartment window. This game does not keep score and it is impossible to lose. The experience of playing the game has been described as serene, uplifting, and beautiful.

*Tetris* is purely competition. The only reason to play the game is to generate as high a score as possible by stacking the blocks. *Flower* on the other hand manages to provide a context for action without any narration at all. The comparison between the dismal city and vibrant meadows creates a drive in the player to spread beauty for no other sake than to witness it. The game reveals the human connection to nature that modern city life often obscures, ironically through the medium of technology. It offers an escape from hectic, regimented, stressful, urban life. By removing the element of competition, *Flower* allows the player to focus purely on the aesthetic elements of the environment and gameplay. Moreover, *Flower* provides an example in which my model of fictional embodiment clearly does not apply. This is not a bad thing. To believe that every video game could be interpreted the same way would be to assume they lack the depth, subtlety, and variety needed to be a legitimate art form. If the games that I have been discussing may be considered a type of narrative, then perhaps *Flower* can be understood as a video game form of poetry. Its meaning is implicit, interpretive. *Flower* is a work of art because it manages to communicate meaningful fiction even without a structured story.



## Chapter Six

### Emotion in Video Games

A consideration of emotions connected to video games yields a number of interesting observations. Video games that tell stories can elicit any emotion associated with traditional narrative, yet they can also tap into the emotions that accompany the playing of games in general. The way these interrelate will form a large part of what makes video games an exciting artistic medium. Moreover, the interactive nature of video games allows for first person emotions in response to not only the game elements, but to the fiction as well. It will be seen that the emotional repertoire utilized by a game constitutes a major part of the experience of playing.

#### 6.1 The Emotions of Games and Competition

To distinguish the types of emotions that arise from various stimuli, Andrew Ortony, et al. (1990) provide a useful framework for the present discussion. They divide emotions into five types dependent on the object and stimulus. Prospect-based emotions are those associated with events in the context of personal goals and include hope, fear, satisfaction, and suspense. Fortunes-of-others emotions comprise empathy or its reverse toward others, fictional or not, with respect to their goals. Emotions of attribution come from evaluation of an agent, whether a person or a game, and include pride and contempt. Emotions of attraction encompass like and dislike for people or objects and are often dependent on familiarity; excessive unfamiliarity leads to disgust or horror. Lastly, well-being emotions are those relating to the desirability of events, such as happiness or depression. By laying out the types of emotions like this, it becomes possible to distinguish what parts of a video game might give rise to certain types of emotions.

The simplest type of emotional engagement with video games arises when they are considered purely as games or competitions. In terms of the above paradigm, pure games allow for prospect-based and attribution emotions. The events of the game are evaluated in terms of a player's ultimate goal, namely winning, leading to suspense via the alternation of hope and fear. The actions of the player and other agents provide opportunity for appraisal, so that a skilled player can feel proud and reproach is felt toward successful competitors. Almost all video games, sports, and board games elicit these emotions to varying degrees. Emotional investment of the player in these terms, then, is not enough to warrant aesthetic analysis of video games on its own. This type of emotion can lead to more engaging experiences, focusing attention, but the experiences that elicit it are not inherently aesthetic in any way.

Nevertheless, pure objective based gameplay may become aestheticized through the process of stylization. According to Aki Järvinen, by stylizing goals, "games condense features of the routine nature of everyday life for entertaining purposes" (2009, 86). Aesthetic stimuli can amplify and stylize information of a utilitarian character, such as that relating to goals. Jenkins (2005) speaks of something similar with his concept of "expressive amplification," which he explains with reference to Asian martial arts films. These films attempt to elicit a physical response to the motion on the screen, to give a sense of kinesthesia that is intensified by the choreography and added sound effects. These techniques draw attention to the style with which an action is carried out in addition to its outcome. For example, Jackie Chan's acrobatic and creative use of the environment in many of the fights in his films provides at least as much pleasure as the battle's result in relation to the narrative. This stylization heightens the emotional involvement of the viewer, resulting in greater suspense, admiration for Chan's character, and satisfaction upon seeing him win. Such observations prompt Järvinen to see stylized graphics in

video games not just as spectacle as they are regularly categorized, but as an important tool for crafting emotional experiences, even if admittedly the recent development trend in mainstream games has overemphasized this component.

Many games in fact overtly draw attention to the way that movement and the attainment of goals become aestheticized. In *Devil May Cry* which was discussed in chapter three, every attack combo performed by the player is given a rating from “Dull” to “Cool” to “Stylish” with better ratings requiring the player to successfully string together a variety of attacks quickly without being hit by an enemy. The rating system provides information about how well the game is being played, determining the reward the player is to receive from the battle while emphasizing the aesthetic character of the action. The player is encouraged not just to dispatch enemies efficiently, but stylishly. By constantly evaluating the performance of the player in an aesthetic context the game focuses attention on Dante’s movements and the ways in which the player can control it, leading to a heightened sense of kinesthesia and hence stronger emotional involvement. On its own though, the stylization of action still may not be enough to warrant the label of aesthetic. At this level, appreciating a video game is similar to watching and performing a gymnastics routine. Both elicit strong emotional responses and emphasize form in addition to the attainment of goals. Yet there is reason to doubt a gymnastics performance is art because the action carries no significance beyond itself. For video games to be art, game goals need not only be given a stylistic character, but also a context that can grant meaning.

Jenkins also argues that emotional intensity in video games arises from the surpassing of physical limitations, the opportunity to be stronger, faster, and smarter than we are in real life. *Devil May Cry* as well as many other games certainly offer this chance and lead to an exhilarating experience with extraordinary levels of frustration, suspense, and satisfaction arising

from the gameplay, but the framework I have established using the principle of fictional embodiment allows a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. I have pointed out that one of the principle purposes of art is to capture the *style* of perception of an embodied subject. Art allows the experience of the world in novel ways because it gives a glimpse of it via the perception of another whose style of interpreting the world is unique. The reason that fictionally identifying with video game characters can be so emotionally intense is that their perception of their environments often lies far beyond the realm of human experience of the material world. To be fictionally embodied as Sonic the Hedgehog for example, the protagonist of a series of games involving moving at high speed, is to see one's surroundings passing by in a blur, yet to maintain the ability to react with precise movement. Sonic's style of perception of the world fundamentally differs from ours, so experiencing his point of view is both fascinating and emotionally intense. Just as importantly however, by granting the ability to temporarily adopt this style, the game draws attention to the fact that the material world is not experienced this way. It foregrounds a part of experience we take for granted; it encourages us to more closely heed the world. Whether the video game manages to say something insightful about the perspective that it grants will determine if it deserves to be considered art according to the definition crafted from Graham's and Tolkien's ideas.

## 6.2 Emotions in Response to Video Game Fictions

It has been shown then that even the rule and objective gameplay of video games can lead to powerful emotional, and possibly aesthetic, experiences when it is combined with stylization of the action that is being performed. Even more interesting results surface when these actions are considered in the context of their respective fictions. When video games contain narratives, they gain all of the emotional tools available to other forms of fiction like literature and film. In

the context of the scheme outlined above, this means emotions of the types fortune-of-others, attribution, and attraction. But on its own this is hardly an interesting observation. Also, before going any further, I wish to point out that I will be avoiding the complications of the so-called paradox of emotions with respect to fiction, which questions the ontological status of these emotions when their referents often do not exist. For my purposes it is enough that emotions in response to fiction feel similar to the real thing; both a fictional and a real death of a friend can elicit a feeling of depression that profoundly affects the one experiencing the emotion even if the latter is significantly stronger, and therefore ontologically different.

Video games are unique in that they allow the emotions related to games to become subsumed by the emotions related to fictions. Tavinor (2006) sees this situation as the ideal. This means that the attribution emotion of pride and the prospect emotion of triumph upon winning a game become linked to the fortune-of-others emotion of happiness of seeing the character succeed as well as the attribution emotion of seeing the character as skillful. Obviously, the situation quickly becomes somewhat complicated even in this simplest example, with the player feeling emotions directed at the self, the fictional character, and the game itself. Even though these emotions can be delineated neatly in discussion, the actual experience of them seems to be more of a hybrid than a collection of distinct feelings. The goal of winning the game becomes the same as a satisfactory conclusion to a fictional event. The emotions relating to both are therefore somewhat confused, with the emphasis leaning to either side depending on the specific situation. Games with limited fictional contextualization will elicit more emotion from the elements of competition, while more fictionally rich games like story-driven rpg's will generate emotional engagement that emphasizes the literary elements.

On the whole, setting the actions of the player within the context of a narrative usually grants them additional emotional weight. When the player's actions contribute to a goal with a tangible outcome in a fictional world, they are given the opportunity to carry meaning. Additionally, the interactive role of the player heightens the emotions in response to the fiction. The knowledge that fictional events have been effected by the action of the player grants weight to any action with fictive consequence. This is the reason that even though many video games may tell lackluster stories, those stories still enthrall players. The narratives remain engaging because of the emotional connection felt by the player as a result of a sense of agency within the fictional world.

The concept of fictional embodiment accounts for this feeling of agency. Video games go beyond literature and film in terms of embodiment because in addition to allowing the experience of another's perception, they allow the experience of another's actions, as well as some of their consequences, emotions included. Embodiment can be used to explain two emotional phenomena related to video games. First, it makes sense of the possibility of feeling first-person emotions with respect to the fiction of the game. Prospect-based and attribution emotions can be felt in response to narrative in a way that other fictional forms do not allow. Video games make it possible to feel proud or guilty with respect to fictional acts, to feel camaraderie with fictional characters, and to feel personally affronted by the antagonist. The cultivation of such emotions potentially leads to extremely engaging interaction with the fictional world of the game.

Marsh takes a similar approach, arguing that by identifying with the controlled character in a video game, the player can undergo that character's experience vicariously (2006). He outlines three types of vicarious experience the player can achieve with emotional repercussions

that each deserve an elaboration. All of them illustrate that emotions constitute an important connection between the player and the fictional world. First, being “in character” strengthens the player’s connection to the environment. Here, Marsh seems to mean the player comes closer to a sense of presence. As a result, navigation of the environment becomes an emotional stimulus. The player might get a sense of the sublime while exploring a mountain pass, fear from creeping through a poorly lit hallway, or wonder while approaching an impressive building. Both the design of the virtual space as well as aesthetic choices on how to depict it will contribute to these emotions and profoundly affect the experience of play. Carr (“Space, Navigation, and Affect” 2006) performs an illustrative comparison of two video games with similar thematic elements and imagery to show that the way space is experienced in each completely changes the feeling of play.

Secondly, Marsh says that recognizing and attributing other characters’ emotions creates a sense of connection on a personal level. The situation differs somewhat from that usually encountered in literature because through vicarious experience, the player can feel connected to the other characters directly rather than empathically by relating to a literary protagonist. Although the degree to which the player might identify with the avatar differs depending on the specific game, the results when this situation works can be impressive. *Mass Effect 2* provides an excellent example. The protagonist can be customized and named by the player, allowing the creation of a virtual proxy of the player if so desired. The game is organized so that the player’s ship acts as a base and objectives are planned and chosen from there. The time on the ship between missions also gives a chance for the player to talk with the various crew members that have been recruited. Players can choose whether or not and in what manner to cultivate relationships with the crew. If the player does choose to engage them, then crew members might

ask for favors or advice, opening access to new missions that if completed successfully will increase the crew's loyalty, making each member more reliable in battle. Failure, however, might prompt a crew member to abandon the team during a future mission. The loyalty system goes even further by requiring the character to arbitrate arguments among the crew, and even allowing the cultivation of romantic relationships with some. The game thus encourages the player to form relationships with the fictional characters that are based on emotions relating to narrative elements rather than those of pure gameplay. Moreover, most of the emotions that drive these decisions are felt in the first person, not empathically in relation to the protagonist. It is the feelings of camaraderie, trust, jealousy, obligation, or disdain that the player feels toward the crew that are important. Marsh's last point is closely related, stating that other characters' responses to the player generate a sense of existence in the fictional world. If the player does decide to play according to his own emotions then the actions of other characters can be considered responses to them.

Another result of the embodiment unique to video games is that the fiction can play out differently as a result of the emotions of the player when they influence action. For example, Tavinor (2006) notes that curiosity is often a motivating factor for exploring virtual environments. When exploration is not part of the player's goal, the emotion provides sufficient impetus to perform the action anyway. Even more interesting though, emotions can affect the ability of the player to play the game. For example, the sight of a frightening enemy can scare a player enough so that the ability to efficiently respond becomes impeded. On the level of prospect emotions related to goals, frustration might lead to the same result. Conversely, a feeling of rivalry toward an adversary might motivate a player to perform better. Emotion can also direct the experience by motivating a particular mode of gameplay such as cautious,



methodical, or blasé, or it can drive the development of the narrative in so far as it depends on the player's choices. The *Mass Effect* examples show how the emotions of the player can influence choices that serve to construct the narrative. The player may win the game regardless of any relationship to the crew, but the experience of doing so and the meaning of the actions that accomplish that goal will differ. The emotions relating to competition are subordinated to those relating to narrative. Additionally, they can become manifested in the fictional world of the game; game fictions react to the emotions of players.

Fictional embodiment also relates to the emotions in response to narrative in the way discussed at the conclusion of the previous section. Since video games transmit the perspective of a fictional character, often one placed in fantastic circumstances, they allow the experience of emotions in response to situations dangerous, impractical, or simply impossible to achieve in everyday living. As opposed to literature or film which attempt to convey emotion by having the reader relate to the experiences of a character, video games can attempt to convey the experience itself. Of course overstating the degree to which they accomplish this is easy. No one would suggest that a war game could fully communicate the horror of actually being in a battle. Even seemingly contradictory emotions seem to arise, for instance enjoyment from committing acts of violence. Nevertheless, the range of emotions that skilled designers have evoked in players remains impressive. Many players, myself included, report profoundly moving emotional experiences in response to video games. Tavinor goes as far as to suggest that using emotion to charge players' actions within video games with significance may be the most promising aspect of games as a form of art. In addition to granting the player's actions an aesthetic character, video games allow the incorporation of emotional responses to those actions and the world in which they take place into the formation of the experience itself, tying the fiction together.

### 6.3 Emotional Elements and Their Effects in Video Games

Now that it has been shown that the interactive nature of video games leads to both the intensification of emotions in response to fiction as well as access to new combinations of emotions, some of the ways that video games elicit these emotions will be more closely examined. Juul (2013) points out that the possibility of failure in video games leads to the experience of a number of interesting emotions and influences play in several important ways. First it is important to note that failure in reference to a video game can refer to both gameplay and the fictional failure of the character, which are often, though not always, linked. This means that the failure in video games has at least a component that cannot be considered cathartic in the way that fiction usually is. Losing the game means that the player has actually lost something; outside of the fiction the emotion in response to loss is real. The separation of the failure of the player and character can lead to a number of paradoxical emotional results. On one level, we can be sympathetic to characters without wanting to identify with them, as might be the case for Oedipus, yet this is no different from traditional fiction. More interestingly, a player can be happy about winning a game, even if the fictional result is bad for the character, and vice versa. Taken in conjunction with the idea of fictional embodiment, video games seem to offer the opportunity for a type of internal conflict other forms of fiction cannot provide. Since actions are performed by both the player and character, emotional responses to them can conflict. To probe even deeper, this conflict might be interpreted as the player experiencing the emotion of the character and rejecting it. To say that the player undergoes the emotional experience of a character does not mean it is undergone willingly. The experience and its rejection might even be separated temporally. This gives a sensible way to interpret the potentially disturbing descriptions of actions required of the player in *God of War* and *Ninja Gaiden 3* described in the

previous chapter. The player can and should be revolted by some of the actions of these protagonists. Fictional embodiment allows the player access to the mindset and emotional repercussions felt by the characters when they perform these actions, possibly allowing for a better understanding behind their motivations. Either conflict between the emotions of the player and character or experience of their emotions and subsequent rejection both mean the player has deemed the actions immoral. Thus instead of being training for violence, video games might in fact be one of the strongest forms of fiction for exploring morality. Of course this means that designers, just like other artists, hold a tremendous amount of power over the formation of players' moral views and that children should be protected from potentially harmful content. The morality of video games is an area of intense debate that cannot be covered adequately here, but it might be worth keeping in mind that if video games are ever to be recognized as a legitimate form of art, they need to be allowed to address complicated issues in ways intended for mature audiences.

Juul seems to have a sense of this potential inherent in video games when he recognizes that the player's realization that he has been working for an unworthy goal can be a powerful emotional device. The recognition is more poignant than a similar situation in literature because of the player's role in carrying out the action. Subsequently Juul suggests video games might be the "strongest art for exploring tragic possibilities." This adds an emotional component to the sense of inevitability despite the power of choice that has already been discussed with respect to video game narratives. One last effect of failure pointed out by Juul is the fact that it forces the player to reconsider the actions being performed. Although failure can disrupt the sense of immersion in the fictional world by drawing attention away from the fiction to the game elements, it can also serve as a reminder that the player's actions in the fictional world actually

matter. The relationship to the fictional world can be strengthened by being reminded that it is a theater for meaningful action; it is a place where the player has a real power of agency.

Depending on how failure is communicated to the player, perhaps it only leads to a branch in the narrative instead of its abrupt halt, it may even strengthen immersion, and hence the emotions felt by the player.

Järvinen offers a more comprehensive view of emotions in video games, both in terms of variety and source. A few of his insights effectively explain how emotions in video games operate. First, he advocates studying play experiences by means of examining “action tendencies.” Player action is restricted both by the rules of game design and the habituation resulting from the coerciveness of those rules. For example, experience within a certain genre builds upon itself, so that the player is conditioned to play that genre in a certain way, even when picking up a new title. Action tendencies are important because they act as the intermediary between goals and the emotions that arise from the struggle to attain them. If the player is conditioned to act in a certain way in response to a goal, then the nature of the struggle and hence the emotions involved can be predicted to some degree by the designer. On a related note, Järvinen believes that emotions in games should be examined in terms of “game states,” the overall condition of the game rather than the contributions of individual elements since the combination can often yield results beyond the sum the parts. Lastly, by shifting the field of experience away from everyday life by placing it in the context of a game and narrative, utilitarian information can take on an aesthetic character as has been mentioned. By combining these principles, one sees that video game design can move beyond the construction of a functional game into the crafting of an experience. Video game design becomes an aesthetic endeavor by means of cultivating emotions in response to aesthetic stimuli.

Designers have access to a number of tools for manipulating the intensity of emotions felt by players, several of which Järvinen lays out. For example, some of them include the sense of reality or immersion in the game world, the degree to which the player identifies with character goals, unexpectedness, arousal- cognitive and psychological readiness for emotion- as well as a host of what he denotes as local variables such as degree of effort and likelihood. By using these elements to modulate the emotions relating to game states, designers can craft an impressive array of emotional experiences, even when dealing with similar subject matter or gameplay goals. Järvinen shows through a comparison of *Thrust* (Firebird Software, 1986) and *Ico* (Sony Computer Entertainment America, 2001) that games with similar structural goals and means can communicate vastly different emotional experiences. Both involve the goal of transporting something from one place to another while avoiding obstacles; yet differ in rhythm, role of the protagonist, environment, and sense of reality so that the experience of playing each is completely different. *Thrust* is experienced primarily as a game with accompanying prospect-based emotions dominating; whereas *Ico*'s rich fictional content is emphasized leading to a range of emotions.

Järvinen's ideas make sense within the paradigm of fictional embodiment because they stress the importance of the full experience of the player. The emphasis is on how the player interacts with a fictional world and the consequences of those actions. Game states might be reinterpreted as all of the sensory stimuli a player receives through embodiment via the perspective of the character. By focusing game design on the emotional experience of the player, the goal becomes the creation of an artistically meaningful embodiment. This is where the difference between merely engaging and artistic games lies. Engaging video games can cultivate successful embodiment that is emotionally intense for the player. Artistic games are those that

take advantage of this embodiment to try to show something to the player that will prompt reflection. The actual playing of the game is where the aesthetic experience originates, but appreciation may not come until the player's attention returns back to the real world. Playing a game, or reading a book for that matter, may prove so engrossing that we don't think about it until we set it down. This is when we compare virtual experiences to actual ones in an attempt to learn something. It is because video games allow experience in a confined context, one that is in only some ways similar to real life, that those experiences can be examined as a meaningful whole. The experiences gained from playing video games, while potentially profoundly affecting, are still only virtual since the actions have been carried out by a virtual self. Reflecting on these experiences amounts to an acknowledgment of the separation between the physically and virtually embodied selves, even though the two can be intricately interwoven. Players both have and have not carried out actions in the fictional world. To regain language more familiar to traditional fiction analysis, one might even say that after playing has ceased, the player can empathically relate to his own embodiment in the game; for if Merleau-Ponty is right about embodiment determining identity, then entering a game world might be considered temporarily creating a virtual identity. In a sense appreciating video game fictions still require empathy, but their unique experiential quality means that we must empathize with a segmented part of ourselves.

To conclude this section, it will be useful to enumerate some of the other elements of video games that act as emotional stimuli yet have not been stressed. Doing so should give an indication of the variety and intensity of emotions video games can evoke. Gameplay elements as simple as difficulty can affect the emotional response to a game, for example, by communicating the perilousness of moving on a high ledge or affecting the degree of satisfaction

from overcoming an adversary. The availability of resources can create a sense of urgency. Rhythms, in the sense used by Kirkpatrick, of action, exploration, puzzle-solving, or other methods of engagement as well as the pacing of alternation between them affects the level of energy felt by the player. The type of action demanded of the player such as stealth, combat, or strategic planning provides a large portion of the overall mood of play, as do the rules of gameplay governing these activities. Both the layout and method of traversal of the environment can give a sense of everything from liberating freedom to claustrophobia. Removing game information such as text or maps from the screen can increase immersion. Control of the virtual camera can encourage exploration whereas restricting control can help to create apprehension regarding space outside the field of view.

Additionally, design elements more traditionally considered aesthetic also affect the types of emotions elicited by playing. The visual design of characters and the environment determine the overall flavor of the fictional world. Sound effects also contribute to the same goal. The choice to communicate dialogue through text or vocal performances can alter the level of drama. I could probably write an entire chapter on video game music and the ways in which different types of music can amplify emotions surrounding specific types of play, the narrative, and the atmosphere of the environment. In fact, video game scores are beginning to receive recognition for reaching the expressive level of film scores. When these aesthetic elements are combined with the gameplay elements, video games can acquire an impressive emotional repertoire, all of which can go into crafting an aesthetically sophisticated experience of fictional embodiment for designers who care to take advantage of the possibilities.

#### 6.4 Case Study: *BioShock*

An example that illustrates how all of these elements of emotion in video games come together in order to generate a cohesive experience may be found in *BioShock*. This game has been mentioned in several contexts already, but here I wish to examine it a bit more holistically while maintaining a focus on the emotional experience of the player. *BioShock* acts, in part, as a response to the objectivist philosophy of Ayn Rand. The player explores the ruined remains of an underwater city called Rapture founded by Andrew Ryan (catch the pun on the names?) on precisely these principles. Exploration of the city and interaction with the few survivors reveals that the settlement gradually descended into chaos due to fighting over control of a substance allowing the manipulation of genes called ADAM, which in the game is what allows the player to become stronger. Abuse of the drug has turned most of the population into vicious “splicers,” deranged shells of their humanity that kill on sight as they wander Rapture searching for ADAM.

The genius of *BioShock* is that it manages to convey so much directly through its gameplay rather than through passive narrative elements. A good place to start is the exploration of Rapture. The player gains access to various parts of the city including the medical ward, city park, power plant, as well as residential and commercial districts. Each area generates a different range of emotions based on a combination of factors. The park and city squares demand a sense of awe in response to the grandeur of Rapture, especially considering its undersea location, but this is tainted by the decay that has set in<sup>9</sup>. Rubble and bodies litter the streets which are patrolled by splicers. These sites are relatively open, allowing relatively free movement during combat with the splicers, so that even though the player feels apprehensive about exploring, the environment doesn't feel oppressive. In contrast, the tight, dark corridors of the hospital streaked with blood elicit a much stronger feeling of anxiety<sup>2</sup>. Enemies may lurk around any corner and

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<sup>9</sup> See screenshot 1 in chapter six of appendix. From this point on superscripts will designate relevant figure numbers in the appendix.



the ambient sounds of the environment are amplified by the hollow halls. Footsteps echo from vague directions, water noisily leaks in from outside, and muffled yells can be heard in the distance. Happening upon the grotesque remains of the genetic experiments<sup>3</sup> heightens the sense of unease. The sickening feeling that accompanies the investigation of the sites of genetic experiments provides a far more convincing warning of the dangers involved than any piece of rhetoric I have heard. While exploring, the sparse soundtrack contributes to a sense of dread then abruptly crescendos when an enemy appears to intensify the surprise. Of course the suspense associated with winning or losing the game gets tied up with the fear of the environment and its inhabitants, but this emotion is absorbed into those relating to the fiction so that it is mostly forgotten.

The visual aesthetic of the game complements the emotions related to exploration. Rapture itself has an art deco design<sup>4</sup> which couples well with the Randian themes as well as the horror elements. The boldness and optimism of this style match the rugged individualism advocated by Rand, so the city's state of disrepair acts as a commentary on her philosophy. Carefully sneaking through an abandoned bar while a popular show tune from the 1950's drones from a record player in the corner of the room is needless to say more than a little creepy, but it is also meaningful. As far as the visuals go, the splicers would also do any horror film special effects manager proud<sup>5,6</sup>. The most ingenious character design, however, comes in the form of Big Daddies and Little Sisters<sup>7,8</sup>.

The player's interactions with these last two types of characters form the emotional core of *BioShock*. The Little Sisters are the most disturbing results of the ADAM experiments conducted at Rapture's height. In effect, they serve as reservoirs for the gene-altering drug and are filled with so much of it that to call them human anymore is up to debate. The reasoning

behind the scientists' choice of little girls to carry ADAM is that people would be reluctant to harm them, even if they wanted the ADAM the girls hold. Big Daddies serve as body guards for the Little Sisters. The first time the player sees one of these pairs is as a splicer attacks a Little Sister in an attempt to extract the ADAM from her body. After the Big Daddy intervenes, the splicer will most definitely not have the chance to make such a poor decision again. Two characters in the game offer contradictory advice on how to deal with these pairs. One urges the player to kill the Little Sisters for their ADAM in order to become stronger, while the other provides a tool that will extract the ADAM safely, returning the girl back to normal but leaving much less of the precious serum for personal use. Alternatively, they may be ignored. Big Daddies will not attack unless the player acts first, so it is completely possible to avoid the issue. Personally, after seeing the first Little Sister I encountered cower in fear of me<sup>9</sup>, I felt compelled to save every one I could find. A purely emotional component of the game determined my action, a decision that as far as I could tell at the time was to my own detriment (after saving a few Little Sisters, they begin to bring you useful items that they find to make up for the lost ADAM). Yet even to save the Little Sisters requires the player to kill their Big Daddies, which is both physically and emotionally difficult. These lumbering giants are among the most powerful creatures in the game, but it is not hard to see that they are far from evil for wanting to protect their charges. To add to the quandary, the Little Sisters become understandably distraught as their only remaining friend (whom they affectionately refer to with such charming epithets as "Mr. Bubbles") collapses. While it is true that this mechanic simplifies morality to a binary, killing or saving, it remains a profoundly affective tool. It generates first person emotions such as greed, compassion, guilt, or vindication with respect to the game fiction and uses this response to drive gameplay.

The player's moral decision has repercussions in other elements of the game as well. In order to reach the end of the game, the player has to disguise himself as a Big Daddy and if any Little Sisters have been saved they will aid the player in reaching the antagonist. During this sequence the player is responsible for protecting her from splicers. Knowing that I was responsible for her led me to disregard my own safety as I frantically battled any attackers, but to no avail; one of the girls helping me was killed. I was deeply disturbed. Her death had no effect on the outcome of the game so my response can only be attributed to my emotional involvement. My fictional embodiment made it feel as if I were personally responsible for her death. The game allows the player to learn something of the despair from failing to protect someone by reflecting on his own experience in the game. Furthermore, the ending of the game changes based on how many Little Sisters the player has saved. If the player has chosen not to kill any of them, then he will not be strong enough to defeat the antagonist, and only survives because the girls he saved come to rescue him. The ending movie shows that as a reward for kindness, the player has earned a family. If the player has ruthlessly killed the girls, then after defeating the antagonist the ending movie will suggest the player is now powerful enough to violently take a position of power back outside Rapture, fulfilling the logical extreme of Rand's philosophy, but not without connoting a sinister tone. Instead of the ending movie being peaceful and uplifting, it shows the protagonist slaughtering a rescue team at Rapture's entrance so that he may bring ADAM to the surface to sell it. By drawing on the player's emotions *BioShock* thus manages to generate a meaningful fiction that has something to say about a philosophical idea. The player's experiences in Rapture as well as the ruins of the city itself serve as an argument against Rand.

This short analysis is meant to show that *BioShock* elicits a variety of emotions from the player, including first-person responses to the narrative, by utilizing both ludic and

representational elements. It illustrates that a game may create a meaningful fiction that takes into account the player's choice and that emotions play a large role in how these types of fictions are formed. While perhaps not the most sophisticated model for morality, the game manages to explore a challenging issue and incorporate the player's actions into this exploration. *BioShock* shows that the emotions in response to video games can be meaningful and aesthetically worthwhile.

#### Conclusion:

The emotions of video games were seen to ultimately derive from two sources, the rules of gameplay and the fiction. The most interesting phenomena arose when emotions of both types intermingled and led to novel emotional experiences that don't seem to be found in quite the same form outside of playing video games. Interactivity led to the possibility for first-person emotions in response to fiction in interesting ways. Lastly, it was considered how these elements might be combined to create aesthetic experiences. Having concluded the theoretical discussion of video game aesthetics, the only thing that remains is to apply this system in the evaluation of specific case studies. This will be the task of the next chapter.

## Chapter 7

### In-Depth Analyses

Now that a set of criteria for evaluating the artistic merit of video games has been established, this system will be applied to a few video games that I believe serve as ideal examples of what the medium is capable of. I have purposefully chosen video games with minimal amounts of passive narrative components such as cut-scenes, instead focusing on the ways in which the experience of actually playing can be aesthetically significant. I avoided these games up to this point so that they may be analyzed as wholes without emphasis on the components that serve as the topics for the previous chapters. Furthermore, these games already have some support for being considered works of art in addition to being critically acclaimed, which should demonstrate that entertaining gameplay and serious artistic aims need not contradict. Also, it should be noted that as I have expressed numerous times, these analyses do not serve as replacements for experiencing the games firsthand. Anyone who honestly wishes to fully understand the forthcoming discussion should pick up a controller; for the two games that are to be discussed depend on participation perhaps more than any that has been mentioned so far. Lastly, numbering in this section will refer to screenshots compiled in the appendix in order to provide a better idea of the imagery employed by these games than my descriptions can alone.

#### *7.1 Shadow of the Colossus*

The second major title crafted by the developers at Team Ico under the guidance of Fumito Ueda, *Shadow of the Colossus*, was released in 2005 for the Playstation 2 console. It is an action-adventure game with puzzle elements, although it is fairly atypical for a game of this

genre in that there are only sixteen enemies throughout the entire game that the player must face. The first playthrough took me, a player of fairly average skill, about twelve hours to complete.

Before delving into the mechanics of the gameplay, I will provide an overview of the narrative, some of which is delivered through two cut-scenes, each of about ten minutes in length. One occurs at the very beginning of the game before play begins and the other occurs at the end, after gameplay has mostly finished. There are a few much shorter segments interspersed through the rest of the game. The player controls a young man unnamed during the game, but referred to as Wander by Ueda.

The introductory movie opens with an eagle soaring across an empty landscape<sup>1</sup> until it flies past Wander riding his horse Agro with another body slumped over in front of him<sup>2</sup>. Wander continues to an overgrown shrine and makes his way through a gateway as music with an undeniably mystical character plays<sup>3</sup>. There is something more to this place than can be seen. The next area gives the first indication of the scale of the game as Wander crosses a massive bridge to reach the main building of the shrine<sup>4</sup>. The player also receives the first indication that something may be amiss when Agro enters the shrine only reluctantly after being encouraged by Wander. Upon reaching an altar, Wander sets the body of a young woman on it, prompting a disembodied voice coming from the light through the roof, simultaneously male and female, to ask him why he has come to this Forbidden Land<sup>5</sup>. Wander explains that the maiden has been sacrificed by the village shaman for “having a bad fate” and that he has come to ask the spirit of this region, revealed to be named Dormin, to revive her. The voice explains that with the help of the magic sword that Wander carries, his task may be possible, though it may come at great cost<sup>6</sup>. Heedless of the danger to himself, Wander agrees to destroy the sixteen colossi that inhabit the Forbidden Land in exchange for the life of his love, though the exact relationship remains

unclarified. The player's quest is thus set out. Armed with only a sword and bow and with no allies other than Agro, Wander must find and destroy sixteen enormous beings made of flesh and stone.

Now the gameplay which forms a highly rhythmic pattern begins. The player must systematically search for each colossus and fight it using a few cryptic clues from Dormin before being transported back to the shrine to repeat the process. When the player takes control, no name and almost no history of the protagonist has been provided, making it easy to identify with him as opposed to seeing him as a character that acts according to his own will. Wander stumbles as he runs, can only hang from ledges for a limited time before losing his grip, and visibly struggles with the weight of his sword. He gains no new abilities over the course of the game and can only take slightly more damage than a normal person before being killed. He is profoundly human. Wander therefore serves a prime candidate for the concept of fictional embodiment that has been developed throughout this paper. The way he experiences the environment is very close to the way we would, making him easy to relate to, so the player naturally feels extended into the game world through him. Additionally, since control is wrested from the player only rarely from this point until the end of the game, the sense that it is the player completing this quest, not watching Wander do it, is enhanced.

The game mechanics of navigation lead to a number of interesting experiences. First, the player must use the sword in order to find the colossi. When held up to the sun, it reflects the light in the direction of the next colossus, providing a necessary sense of direction in the expansive Forbidden Lands. By forcing the player to actively search for the correct path instead of having a map or arrow informing the player, the designers encourage a deeper sense of immersion. From the need to constantly check for a proper heading, the player's attention

becomes more focused on the environment, taking account of the ways the terrain must be traversed in order to reach the goal, although, it would be hard not to take notice of the environment on account of its haunted beauty<sup>7-10</sup>. A sense of the sublime becomes unavoidable. The game world itself ties together a number of important elements of the game. For one, other than for Wander and Agro, it is completely deserted, with barely any sign of life other than the colossi. The sparse landscape truly feels like a forbidden place. Additionally, the sheer size of the environment forces the player to rely on Agro for mobility. Even with Agro it can take upwards of twenty minutes of lonely riding before finding a colossus. Spending so much time together in the deserted Forbidden lands coupled with the need for her help during several of the battles encourages the player to become genuinely attached to Agro. She reacts realistically to the colossi, attempting to flee if dismounted, yet she will always obey the player when called or when the player is riding her. These segments of exploration with Agro are peaceful, yet retain a sense of foreboding since the player does not know precisely when the next colossus will be discovered.

The really fascinating moments begin when the player finally comes into contact with one of the colossi. The long search inevitably builds up suspense, and the cryptic descriptions provided by Dormin only serve to increase the mystery surrounding each colossus. When Wander finally reaches the lair of a colossus, there is a short video introducing it, and each effectively demonstrates both that every colossus is unique and would rightly be regarded with a sense of awe. The role of the opening movie and environment have been mentioned in generating a sense of scale, but it is only through the colossi that this component of the game reaches fruition and achieves an impression that I have never felt from another game. The first time I saw a colossus after struggling up the side of a cliff was astonishing. I had no idea how one so small



could ever hope to confront such a massive adversary. The pictures in the appendix can only go so far in capturing the enormity of these creatures since it is through their slow, heavy motion that their weight is truly communicated<sup>11-14</sup>. Since the colossi are the only enemies in the game and they are so separated, every battle feels significant. The battles often break down into a number of stages that together constitute a unique experience that feels totally different for each colossus.

For example, upon seeing the first colossus I drew my bow and tried firing only to see the tiny arrows had no effect. Eventually I discovered that by reflecting light with the sword in the same way that had led me to the colossus, I could see a shining glyph on the giant's leg. I realized that by stabbing the colossus in the calf, I could cause it to stumble, allowing me to reach its head, the location of another weak point, so that I could finally kill it. When the player finally reaches a colossus's weak point and prepares to stab it, the camera dramatically zooms to just behind Wander's shoulder, giving almost a first person view. Holding the button longer results in Wander drawing the sword back further and the controller shakes upon impact, the combination of which gives a visceral sense of the motion. I noticed myself leaning back when charging the attacks and jerking forward when they came down. Elements such as these go even further toward embodying the player in the role of Wander. Admittedly, this series of actions doesn't constitute much of a "puzzle" per se, but the later colossi force the player to manipulate the environment in clever ways and the task of climbing onto each of them in order to reach their weak points with the magic sword was a new and challenging experience every time.

Since the encounters are infrequent, pit the player against such enormous adversaries, require a new strategy every time and last for so long (the last battle can take up to an hour), the game generates more of a sense of epic struggle than I have experienced in any other. Moreover,

every triumph feels like a tremendous accomplishment, with each victory bringing the player a step closer to reviving the lost love. The grandiose nature of the game naturally lends itself to the creation of memorable moments. The battles against the colossi often split naturally into sequences that can be denoted as “sub-narratives” as they were discussed in chapter five. These sub-narratives include finding a way to draw its attention, climbing onto it, finding its weak point, and finally using the sword to stab the glowing symbols that mark it. The progression between these steps is often marked by a change in the orchestration of the background music. The music might be moody or ominous as Wander tries to approach the colossus and change to triumphant once he manages to climb atop its back. Two moments particularly stood out to me, even though there are dozens of impressive sequences during the game. In the first, the player must roll to the side as a colossus strikes the ground with its sword, then run along it to reach the giant's arm and eventually climb to its head<sup>15</sup>. The second involves riding Agro while being chased by an enormous sand serpent, turning backward to fire an arrow into its eye, and finally leaping from the saddle to land on the creature's back<sup>16</sup>. Since Wander possesses no special powers other than his sword, the player must rely on his own creativity and skill to defeat the colossi, strengthening the embodiment. Determining the way to slay each colossus falls on the player, even if Dormin does provide clues if the battle drags on long enough. Nevertheless, when the strategy becomes apparent, the challenge remains due to Wander's frail humanity which is reasserted by gameplay elements such as being able to hold onto a colossus for only a limited time before falling off and being shaken helplessly when the colossi try to throw him off.

Up to this point, *Shadow of the Colossus* could already be considered a superb game, even artistically valuable in the ways that I have suggested video games can be. It generates a sense of the sublime both in the environment and in other forms of life. The love that a young

man feels for a woman is revealed to hold tremendous power. The game manages to set up an incredible sense of scale in a quest that nevertheless remains tied to an extremely personal goal. It reminds its players of both human frailty as well as the limitlessness of what we may accomplish given the right motivation. By fictionally embodying as Wander, the player can experience his determination, loyalty, and desperation (he can look and sound terrified when fighting the colossi, for example when calling out for Agro after being separated). Yet the emotional depth of the game plumbs much deeper.

As early as the battle against the first colossus, the player begins to feel that all is not as it seems. Stabbing the colossus results not in a flow of blood, but in a jet of shadow being released<sup>17</sup>. When the colossi finally fall, there is a short video of their deaths; the earth shakes as they crumble and collapse. However, the scene is accompanied by a mournful, almost funereal melody, suggesting to the player that through Wander he has slain something majestic, a gloomily beautiful part of the Forbidden Land itself. It is worthwhile to note that although there is a button command for Wander to swing his sword, this action is never used to attack the colossi directly. Hurting the colossi always involves Wander turning the sword in his hand and stabbing downward. Since swinging a sword is usually associated with fair combat and downward stabbing with betrayal or intrigue, the method of attack thus intimates a sinister role for the player. More disturbingly, tendrils of shadow burst out of the colossus's body and zigzag through the air before impaling Wander, even as the player retains control<sup>18</sup>. He collapses as the screen fades to a pattern that suggests he may have died<sup>19</sup>, yet he awakens again in the shrine, but not before the player is given a view of a humanoid shadow looming over his prone body<sup>20</sup>. Dormin instructs Wander to find and destroy the next colossus, beginning the cycle over again. Each colossus slain is represented by another shadow standing over Wander when he awakens in

the shrine, and by the end of the game he is completely surrounded<sup>21</sup>. Upon defeating the next few colossi, every player invariably attempts to run away from the tendrils of shadow, but to no avail. Eventually the player acknowledges the inevitability of the situation; you stop running. There is something deeply depressing about this. Wander's freely accepted quest which is being completed through sheer determination now contains elements beyond the player's control, an element of fate.

The player also begins to notice the behavior of the colossi. Many of them will not attack the player unless they are provoked, and even then will only fight back as long as the player stays nearby. For example one bird-like colossus must be peppered with arrows before it takes any notice of the player at all. One in particular is visibly scared of Wander and must be driven off a ledge by brandishing a torch in its direction. It becomes clear that these are by no means completely evil creatures. Seeing the colossi writhe in pain after every attack starts to become more disconcerting than triumphant.

A turning point occurs about halfway through the game when a close-up of Wander as he awakens reveals that he has grown pale and blotches of blackness have appeared on his hands and neck<sup>22</sup>. Wander is slowly being corrupted. Soon after, a short cut-scene shows a small group of riders led by what appears to be a shaman hurrying to the shrine, yet their purpose remains unclear even if their urgency does not. The sense of uneasiness slowly grows until Wander is ready to face the final colossus. On the way, something happened which left me in a state of shock as deep as that resulting from any other form of fiction. While racing across a crumbling bridge, Agro bucks, just in time to send Wander onto the solid ledge, but in the process falling off the cliff into the river below. Unbelievably loyal to the end, she had sacrificed herself. I was devastated. Over the course of the journey, Agro had become not just Wander's companion, but

through him my own. Spending hours exploring the Forbidden Land together and relying on her during my battles with the colossi made me feel personally attached. Losing her felt like losing a friend, and worse it had happened at the end of our journey, just when we had almost finished. The final battle did not need the accompanying thunderstorm and ominous music to feel grim.

When the player finishes Wander's final goal and wakes back up in the shrine, the group of riders has already arrived. By this point, Wander barely appears human; his skin has been discolored and his eyes are completely white<sup>23</sup>. The player's misgivings over his own actions are confirmed as the shaman recognizes Wander as a fellow villager, and then chastises him for stealing the magical sword, trespassing on the Forbidden Land, and dealing with the demon Dormin who has been sealed there. It is revealed that Dormin was split into sixteen fragments and sealed in the colossi; by slaying them the player has released a demon. The degree of Wander's knowledge regarding the situation remains unclear. The group of warriors attempts to kill Wander to put an end to his corrupted existence, yet when impaled he does not die, but rather turns into one of the shadows that have been accumulating over the course of the game, a shadow of a colossus<sup>24,25</sup>. Even as he is stabbed and riddled with arrows Wander desperately reaches for his love; there is still part of him that remains human. Dormin takes control of Wander's body as he assumes his true form. The player regains control of the game as Dormin, and pressing any button results in an attack on the shaman and warriors who now appear to the player as Wander would have to the colossi<sup>26</sup>.

The enormity of the actions the player has committed is finally revealed. Seeming to the player to be working to revive a love who was unfairly killed, Wander has wittingly or not released a demon. The significance of every action in the game up to this point is enhanced retroactively and is made to feel even stronger by the high degree of embodiment the game

encourages. The player feels himself to be the agent of this outcome, not Wander, or at least not him alone. The visceral feeling of stabbing the colossi now generates guilt in addition to the experience of ruthlessness. The deaths of the colossi which before were only vaguely tragic are now completely so. The game manages to instill the feeling of profound regret in the player. Yet Wander's actions are not totally evil. His quest was undertaken only to save the life of one he loved, and it is possible that he knew little more than the player of the real nature of the colossi. The shaman's moral position is far from clear as well; he has after all murdered a young girl for apparently ambiguous reasons. Even Dormin may not be as evil as the shaman would make it seem. The root of his name, which comes from the Latin word for sleep, combined with his power to revive the dead suggests he may be no more than the god of eternal sleep, of death, wrongfully imprisoned by a blasphemous tribe. The game has directly involved the player in a moral conundrum with no clear answer; for who wouldn't try to save the one he loved if the chance existed? The player has become a victim of fate. While appearing to remain in control of the game's events, the player has unwittingly been working toward an unknown goal. Even so, looking back reveals that any attentive player could never be completely unaware of the ambiguous morality of his actions. *Shadow of the Colossus* proves that video games hold the potential to be effective vehicles for tragedy.

In the last moments of the game the player's actions are given another possible interpretation. As he desperately flees the shrine, the shaman casts a final spell before casting the magic sword into a pool, resulting in the creation of a massive vortex. The player can try to run away, but gradually Dormin is sucked in to reveal a shadow-enshrouded Wander still alive at the core. Despite the player's efforts Wander is pulled into the pool,<sup>27</sup> and Dormin is apparently resealed. The shaman escapes the crumbling shrine and muses if survival in the Forbidden Land

is possible, and if so, if Wander could ever repent for his sins. The screen cuts back to the maiden at the altar as she awakens, for even though it has led to more than he bargained for, Wander has managed to complete his end of the deal. Additionally, a severely wounded Agro finally makes her way back to the shrine. Following Agro, the girl walks to the pool to find a horned baby, presumably a reincarnated Wander, lying at the bottom<sup>28</sup>. She carries him out of the shrine to a garden that is now populated by deer, squirrels, and birds<sup>29</sup>. The last image mirrors the first, an eagle soaring over the Forbidden Land. The repeated imagery may serve as a symbol for the cyclic nature of life or Wander's rebirth. The shaman's question has at least in part been answered; survival is possible. Wander's reincarnation suggests that he may begin anew, although he will always bear the mark of his transgression. The story thus ends on a potentially uplifting, if restrained, note.

The player's personal involvement in the events grants the game its weight. By playing the game the player has not just been told that people make bad decisions for worthy causes, but has actually carried out the actions based on that decision. Realizing that one's actions can go beyond the intended effects and the associated guilt are tempered by the suggestion that it is possible to begin life anew, that the triumph of evil is not absolute. But more than anything else, the moral ambiguity of the player's actions remains paramount. One of the strengths of *Shadow of the Colossus* is that it lets the player examine his own feelings in response to his own actions in order to discover its meaning. Unlike a novel that might let a reader imagine what it is like to feel this way through relation to another character, *Shadow of the Colossus* allows the player to feel something of this regret and redemption personally, with respect to actions the player has performed, even if only fictionally. The player experiences firsthand how we tend to marginalize details that make us feel uncomfortable if they get in the way of a goal we believe to be worthy.

On paper, this narrative and interpretation may sound relatively standard; they don't extend far beyond topics covered in literature before. It is its status as a video game that allows *Shadow of the Colossus* to have the personal impact that it does. Involving the player directly gives the game a different emotional character than traditional forms of fiction.

*Shadow of the Colossus* thus brings together most of the elements I have discussed as artistically relevant to video games into a cohesive, meaningful statement about tragedy. The game effectively allows the player to become fictionally embodied in the game world through Wander and the experience of playing as him communicates his perspective of the environment by means of the game mechanics. The player is reminded of his distinctly human qualities of fragility of the body, yet resilience of the soul as he struggles outmatched against the colossi. The gameplay itself contributes to the overall meaning of the game, for example in the creation of the sense of foreboding while exploring the lifeless environment or the sense of Wander's determination while scaling a colossus. Emotions arising from the competition with the game are tied to those related to the narrative; the suspense felt when Wander is about to lose his grip corresponds to both a setback in the game and the anxiety Wander would feel. Through embodiment as Wander the player feels first-person emotions with respect to the narrative. Music, sound effects, and imagery combine to create a world with a distinguishing character, namely one of mystery, desolation, and haunting beauty. The gameplay is structured to generate memorable moments, the combination of which gives the experience of the game its distinctive epic, yet personal quality.

Like many video games, the premise of *Shadow of the Colossus* is built around violence. But the discussion above shows that this violence is meaningful. It is anything but the mindless carnage for which video games are often criticized. Games like this go beyond providing mere



entertainment; they require careful analysis using legitimate aesthetic criteria for understanding. In short, *Shadow of the Colossus* comes together as an artistic text that demands serious attention.

## 7.2 *Journey*

*Journey*, released in 2009 for the Playstation 3, represents a substantial departure from most modern video games. Made by the developers of *Flower* which was discussed in chapter five, this game shares some characteristics with it. For example, the player cannot lose. No text or speech is ever delivered to the player; anything the game can be said to communicate is told without language. The world of the game completely fills the screen; there are no menus, status bars, or progress markers. Rather than a game to be won in the way that most of the games discussed so far can be, *Journey* offers a specially crafted emotional, perhaps even spiritual, experience. The game can and should be completed in one sitting, clocking in at roughly an hour and a half to two hours for most players. *Journey* may be completed alone or in the company of another player online. The analysis will first focus on the solo experience, then investigate the ways in which a companion changes it.

The first few moments of *Journey* succinctly set up everything the player needs to know in order to play the game. A shooting star passes over a desert peppered with stone markers before the camera focuses on a lone figure<sup>30</sup>. The art style is simple, yet painstakingly refined to be beautiful. The player's character provides the best example. Despite consisting of nothing more than a stick figure wrapped in a cape, the character's movements are animated to be fluid and appear natural, the cape billows realistically in the wind, and walking through the sand leaves a rippling trail as it shimmers in the sun. The simplicity of the imagery encourages the

player to take in the environment as a whole rather than focusing on details, yet the attention paid to even the simplest elements ensures that the world feels alive. Additionally, the character bears no identifying markers. Besides being nameless, the character is faceless, ageless, and sexless. These design choices make identifying with the character on screen easy, and this is profoundly important for experiencing *Journey*. The adventure is very much supposed to be that of the player, only that of a fictional character insofar as the player successfully embodies into that role.

Other than the player, the only visible object in the vast desert expanse is what appears to be a group of fluttering cloths atop a hill in the distance<sup>31</sup>. The game needs nothing more to encourage the player to move in the right direction. Upon reaching the dune the camera pulls back to reveal a mountain in the distant haze with the title of the game overlaid<sup>32</sup>. After less than a minute of walking and a title screen the game has communicated everything the player has to know, that a quest to the mountain is to be undertaken. This simple goal is all that is asked of the player. The game provides no reason, only gives hints regarding the mystery of the fictional world, and even when the goal is reached does not state exactly what the player has accomplished. Instead the player must use the information gathered from interacting with the environment and suggested through about five short visions in order to make sense of the experience.

Advancing a little further brings the player to a shining glyph which grants a glowing scarf that allows floating for a limited period<sup>33</sup>. During flight the glow from the scarf will gradually diminish, and when it empties the player will fall back to the ground. It may be recharged through contact with another piece of the magical fabric from which it is presumably made. These are the only two controls in the game other than movement; one button for floating, another to let out a small sphere of light that activates the magical parts of the environment.

Again simplicity aids in creating the experience *Journey* seeks to cultivate. None of the jumping elements are actually difficult and the “puzzles” are more of an incentive to interact with the environment than anything else. Since the game avoids drawing attention to the controls and the challenges normally associated with games, the player is free to concentrate on absorbing the experience of traveling within the fictional world. *Journey* thus avoids the common problem of gameplay detracting from the narrative while simultaneously capturing the strength of video games, namely agency in the fictional world which gives rise to more complete fictional embodiment. Additionally, the simplicity of the game encourages the player to take a sort of innocent pleasure in movement through the environment. Acts as routine as floating down from a ledge with cape billowing behind or sliding down a sand dune are somehow profoundly satisfying. This is one part of the game I can’t hope to explain adequately with words or pictures; it must be felt.

With the premise of the game set out, it is time to turn to an analysis of the journey itself. The area in which the player acquires the scarf is also the first to feature the freely floating strips of red cloth that will be a common sight in forthcoming travels. Resembling birds or butterflies, they aid the player in reaching high places by reinforcing the floating ability endowed by the scarf<sup>34,35</sup>. Their appearance and helpful nature contribute to the sense that the fictional world is a safe, yet mystical place. Before too long, the player reaches the first of several stone monuments at which the player’s character sits down and appears to meditate, prompting a short vision<sup>36</sup>. In this vision, the player sees a figure resembling himself, but taller and robed in white, whose role remains mysterious<sup>37</sup>. Additionally, a tapestry shows a group of figures apparently growing food and number of others bent toward, possibly worshipping, a large red fabric like those the player has seen<sup>38</sup>. In under a minute control is returned to the player, ensuring that engagement with the

game never feels too passive, yet just as surely leaving interpretation of the vision up to the player. The rest of the visions share this quality of suggesting meaning, yet never forcing a strict interpretation or explanation of how they relate to the actions of the player.

The trek through the desert continues in a similar fashion, yet the introduction of new elements is kept at the perfect pace to keep the experience full of wonder. Some highlights include creating a bridge out of the magical fabric through the sky<sup>39,40</sup>, and the appearance of a larger animated fabric creature<sup>41</sup>. The latter is especially cleverly done. After activating a piece of the magic cloth, it erupts from the sand unexpectedly, accompanied by an amiable, playful melody. Somehow, it convinces the player to follow it. This is part of the genius of *Journey*. It manages to create enough curiosity to direct the player in the required direction with nothing more than a waving cloth and instrumental flourish. Despite the lack of instructions the player is never confused regarding the correct path, even when movement in any direction in an apparently endless desert is possible. Few other games I have played have made my interaction with the fictional world feel so natural; it truly feels as if I am the one exploring it.

Slowly, the lighthearted atmosphere, enhanced by the addition of the more expressive larger fabric creatures, comes into question. The next few visions of the tapestry show the ancient civilization growing in complexity, constructing tall towers and filling them with light, but the magic fabric fades from emphasis<sup>42</sup>. As the player heads deeper into the desert, the scale and complexity of the ruins of this civilization grow as the soundtrack becomes more subdued, even melancholy, featuring lower rumbling tones. A high point in the tension comes when the player discovers a mechanical tower in which a large number of the fabric creatures are trapped<sup>43</sup>. The player is afforded one last sequence of peaceful exploration before the mood turns though. In one of the most beautiful sequences I've ever seen in a game, the player slides down

through the sand in the midst of the ruins at sunset, surrounded by the fabric creatures playfully weaving in and out of the path<sup>44-47</sup>. The accompanying feeling is a mix of freedom, wonder, and simple joy; the music matches and enhances the emotion. Effortlessly sliding through the ruins evokes a satisfying sensation that is hard to describe; it feels as though all of your cares no longer matter. It seems that part of the reason this segment succeeds so fully is that the pleasure is so simple. There is something childlike about it, and by this time the player has been embodied long enough that the experience feels completely personal. The sequence allows the player something of a return to innocence.

This climax of the desert scene makes the abrupt fall into a dark cavern beneath the surface at the end of this sequence all the more shocking<sup>48</sup>. The next vision provides a glimpse of what has happened. The lighted towers blink out, the red fabric in the sky shrivels out of sight while two figures rip another piece in half<sup>49</sup>. A storm appears over the once bright city along with mysterious serpents in the sky. It appears that a once great civilization has collapsed, perhaps due to greed, impiety, wastefulness, or any combination of these and that the ruins explored so far are the only remaining trace. The meaning these events carry in relation to your journey is unclear, yet a sense of their significance remains undeniable.

Regardless, the result is that the next part of the adventure is through a mysterious underground city. An eerie blue light fills the caverns<sup>50</sup> and the sense of security felt so surely only moments before is gone. This is a place no longer fit for habitation. The eruption of a massive, flying, stone serpent from the previous vision confirms these suspicions<sup>51,52</sup>. Again, *Journey* excels at speaking without words. That this creature is dangerous is beyond question as soon as it becomes visible despite its minimalist representation. The game does not need to tell the player that the searchlight roving over the ground represents its field of vision or that when

this light turns red it means the serpent has spotted the player. Being spotted means the serpent will attack the player, sending the tiny character sprawling. Even though the player can't be killed and that therefore this failure has no real consequence, the experience remains distinctly unsettling. The game manages to keep the emotional excitement of a contest attached to that relating to the sub-narrative of avoiding the serpents while eliminating game outcomes. Sneaking through the rest of the cavern remains tense even as failure is sub-consciously dismissed as an option. Again, *Journey* might be more aptly described as an interactive experience than a game.

The feel of the gameplay once again sharply deviates to mirror the player's ascent out of the caverns, accomplished by relighting one of the ancient towers. In the process, the hall becomes flooded with liquid light, through which unlimited flight is possible. In stark contrast to the darkness and careful sneaking of the previous section, the player is free to fly through the light, resulting in the most liberating experience yet. Additionally, as the room fills with light, the magic cloth creatures gradually return to populate it until eventually another new variety appears, this one a direct rival to the stone serpents in size<sup>53</sup>. Fearful awe is replaced with an initially apprehensive, but ultimately comfortable one. That the player has allowed them to return establishes a connection with them. Something of the lightheartedness of the desert returns, though tempered by the darkness of the caverns; this world's creatures can be gentle and helpful as well as menacing and obstructive and learning about both is important. On paper this realization is of course unimpressive, but interacting with both in succession yields such a refreshing experience as to be impossible to write off. Yet this is precisely one of the purposes I have set out for art; it reinvigorates the simple truths of life that through the humdrum of life we have come to forget.

This section ends with the last visions. The city ruins are buried in sand before a lone figure (the player?) descends from the stars above them<sup>54</sup>. Finally, the tapestry in the vision at the top of the tower shows the player's own journey up to this point<sup>55-57</sup>. The player's journey is obviously connected to this lost civilization in some way, but it remains unclear how. Is it the fulfillment of a prophecy, repentance for whatever sins caused its downfall, the completion of a final duty? Any of these seem as plausible as the next. Again, we are given only hints of significance, never explanation. In any case, the player has finally reached the slopes of the mountain.

The snowstorm raging on the mountain quickly puts a damper on the sense of liberation in the tower of light. Ice slowly freezes the player's scarf so that flight is severely limited, the cloth creatures in the area can only be momentarily reanimated, and progress through the deep snow is slow. To make matters worse, the stone serpents have returned. Up to this point the quest has had moments of suspense and danger, but never before has it been this arduous. The effort of the climb is made apparent by decreasing responsiveness of the controls as the player is moved as much by the wind as conscious effort. Everything seems to be absorbed into the white of the snow and howl of the wind, and the situation grows worse with increasing altitude. Eventually the player approaches the summit. Here the storm worsens, lightning streaks the sky, and the player's scarf is blown away. As the slim figure leans into the wind, almost completely frozen, yet still slowly trudging forward, the game perfectly captures the concept of striving<sup>58</sup>. It is a simple, yet touching illustration of grim effort, the refusal to surrender no matter the odds. The journey so far has been too fantastic to give up now. Even though all I had to do was tilt an analog stick, it felt as though I were struggling against the world. *Journey's* simplicity again works in its favor; freed of complex motor tasks, I was completely absorbed in the predicament

of my stick figure proxy. Unfortunately, the effort does not suffice. Eventually the storm engulfs you as you collapse and the screen fades to white. I think you die.

Whether in body or spirit, the player appears unconscious before a council of the white-robed figures<sup>59</sup>. It seems that the player has reached the end of the quest and is about to discover its meaning. Yet again, *Journey* surprises. In a moment of tense excitement, your body slowly floats up from the ground and begins to glow as your magic scarf grows to unprecedented length. To a stirring crescendo you launch into the storm clouds, rocketing past any obstacles<sup>60</sup>. Finally, you burst through the clouds to the peaceful blue sky above to find yourself floating among the gentle cloth giants<sup>61,62</sup>. You have achieved transcendence. What follows is probably the most uplifting segment of gameplay I have ever experienced. Effortlessly soaring through the air among the mountain peaks accompanied by mystical animals as jubilant, at times even prayerful (traditional eastern instruments are utilized), music plays is yet another experience from *Journey* that is difficult to describe. I have already used transcendent, but it was also peaceful and deeply satisfying. I didn't want it to end. Forget memorable moments in video games, this was one of the most profound experiences I have had with any work of art. Among the clouds all the effort spent to get there was vindicated, yet simultaneously all the hints of liberation and peace were revealed to be only hints of this final achievement. It might be noticed that by now I have almost completely settled into describing the emotional impact of *Journey* at the expense of discussing the gameplay elements. This is a testament to how well the game absorbs the latter into the former. They become inseparable. Watching someone else fly through the mountains gives a hint of what it might be like, but doing it firsthand while as embodied as it is possible to be is another experience entirely. The game manages to let you feel yourself soar.



After a final ascent through a stream of glowing glyphs, the player reaches the summit<sup>63</sup>. The player's only remaining task is to advance into the blinding white light<sup>64</sup>. One of the keys to interpreting *Journey*, however, only arises as the credits begin to roll. A single light, just like the shooting star from the first moments of the game rises from the mountain and begins retracing the player's path in reverse<sup>65</sup>. Finally, the star lands in the desert at night<sup>66</sup>, but as the sun begins to rise, it becomes apparent that the image is transforming back into the game's start screen<sup>67</sup>. The journey has ended at the beginning. The star at the beginning may likely have been a previous incarnation of the player, with each of the hundreds of stone markers representing someone's completed journey. This makes sense of the tapestry showing a figure descending from the stars. But then what was the point of the pilgrimage? Does there need to be a point other than the playing out of the endless cycle of life, death, and rebirth? Is the experience of the journey enough to justify its undertaking? These questions go unanswered. Part of the reason *Journey* resonates so powerfully with so many people probably relates to this ambiguity. Each player attaches a personalized significance to the experience.

Played alone, *Journey* is a contemplative experience of wonder, joy, struggle, death, and rebirth. Though these elements remain, undertaking the quest with a companion, adds a distinct flavor to the game, so much so that the primary mood might be said to change from meditative to active. When played online, *Journey* allows the player to interact with others who are at the same point in the game. However, unlike any other online game, the players cannot speak to each other, they cannot harm each other, and they do not know the identity of their companions. One reviewer, Erik Kain, perfectly describes the puzzlement that results when coming into contact with another player: "Nameless, this player looked just like mine, but I could tell instantly that it was another person and not some computer AI. Isn't that remarkable in and of itself, that we can

tell simply by how an onscreen avatar moves around the world that it's a human and not a pre-programmed part of the game?" (2012). In order to demonstrate how the experience changes, I'll pick out a few key moments that emphasize the multiplayer element of the game.

The only collectible "item" in the game is a limited number of glyphs that can increase the length of the player's scarf. During the game, experienced players will often direct newcomers to the locations of these glyphs by signaling them with the ability that activates the magic cloth. Such an act provides the guide with no benefit; it is purely altruistic. Even though they are making separate journeys, players go out of their way to help one another. The situation becomes even more interesting after discovering that proximity to another player recharges one's own scarf. Thus camaraderie is not only allowed, but encouraged. Players are meant to form stable relationships with strangers and come to depend on them. Over the course of the pilgrimage, a real bond is formed with one's companion if you are lucky enough to have one, leading to some touching moments. For example, after dropping into the cavern, two players became separated and in the darkness couldn't see each other. I saw them frantically signal to each other until they reunited. The mountain ascent ceases to be a lonely struggle; instead two companions aid each other up the slopes, providing both morale and real game benefit through their presence. Kain provides a heartwarming example when he recalls,

"As I began to climb the final slopes and the wind and the dragons became more dire and my own situation more desperate, I found myself and this other anonymous person clinging to one another as we moved up the slope. When I was tossed aside by a dragon, left lying half-broken in the snow, the other traveler ran back for me. We climbed together."

This is a type of experience I have not encountered in other games. To be sure other multiplayer games require dependence on others for successful strategies and to win, but *Journey* isn't played to win. By this point of the game, the cape-regeneration ability is almost useless. The support is purely emotional. Kain's tendency to use first person pronouns here should also be brought to attention. This is his journey; he is the one on the mountain. The level of embodiment *Journey* achieves really makes it feel as though you are traveling with another person. One last quote from Kain's review places a nice cap on the discussion:

In a way that no other multiplayer game has done, I felt the *necessity* of companionship in *Journey*. In literally no MMO I've ever played have I felt that need, but in *Journey* that sense of struggle feeds directly into a sense of camaraderie. It's deeply affecting. The whole game is moving in a way I don't yet fully understand... I was nearly speechless. It was so much more profound than walking alone.

Just exactly what it is *Journey* is trying to say still escapes me. But that is the mark of a mature work of art. It is like good poetry, easy to read but hard to pin down, rife with multiple meanings. The fallen civilization might be a warning for our current society. The multiplayer might be meant to show that when it comes down to it, people will help one another. The final flight through the clouds might represent a mystic experience of the world that the modern mind has forgotten. Or not. What I do know is that *Journey* takes video games a step further in a bold direction, toward the purposeful crafting of an interactive experience. Perhaps this makes it closer to traditional art to begin with than most other video games.

Experience has been a key word in this paper. It was argued that video games can be an exciting art form because they allow a deeper kind of fictional embodiment, the experience of another's perspective, so that players may see the world anew. *Journey* is special because perhaps more than any other game I've played, it coheres as a remarkably complete, distinct, and unbroken experience. There are no interruptions, distracting instructions, nagging need at the back of the mind to perform better. I'm not claiming that gamers have finally found a *Hamlet* equivalent to rally around in their fight for legitimacy, but they could certainly be a lot worse off.

## Appendix: Screenshots

## Chapter 2



Figure 1

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEQc8n-844k>



Figure 2

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEQc8n-844k>



Figure 3

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9fFPnZQ-zE>



Figure 4

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9fFPnZQ-zE>

## Chapter 3



Figure 1

[www.theicecave.org](http://www.theicecave.org)



Figure 2

[www.giantbomb.com](http://www.giantbomb.com)



Figure 3

[devilmaycry.org](http://devilmaycry.org)

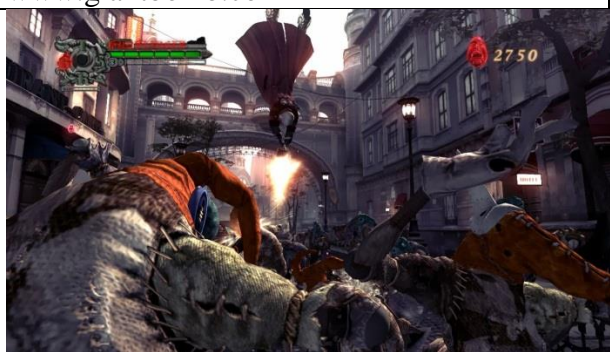


Figure 4

[disasteryear20xx.blogspot.com](http://disasteryear20xx.blogspot.com)

## Chapter 6



Figure 1

[oldworldforthenew.wordpress.com](http://oldworldforthenew.wordpress.com)



Figure 2

[bioshock.wikia.com](http://bioshock.wikia.com)



Figure 3  
bioshock.wikia.com



Figure 4  
bioshock.wikia.com



Figure 5  
bioshock.wikia.com



Figure 6  
bioshock.wikia.com



Figure 7  
bioshock.wikia.com



Figure 8  
hdwallpapers.com



Figure 9  
www.gameinformer.com

Chapter 7

*Shadow of the Colossus*

All pictures are from the following website unless otherwise noted  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hZjQHMq6oc>



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4





Figure 5



Figure 6

Figure 7  
[thecontrollerreport.wordpress.com](http://thecontrollerreport.wordpress.com)Figure 8  
[www.gamespot.com](http://www.gamespot.com)Figure 9  
[malformities.tumblr.com](http://malformities.tumblr.com)Figure 10  
[www.geekshow.us](http://www.geekshow.us)



Figure 11  
[teamico.wikia.com](http://teamico.wikia.com)



Figure 12  
[www.gameinformer.com](http://www.gameinformer.com)



Figure 13  
[www.dualshockers.com](http://www.dualshockers.com)



Figure 14  
[www.gpforums.co.nz](http://www.gpforums.co.nz)



Figure 15  
[www.berfrois.com](http://www.berfrois.com)



Figure 16  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gmc8yuSI Z5g>



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19

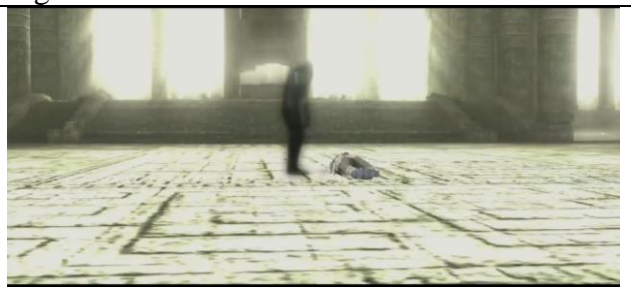


Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26



Figure 27

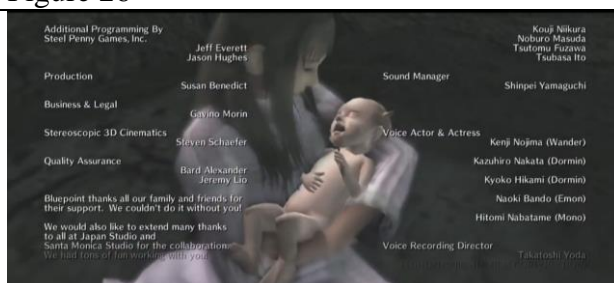


Figure 28



Figure 299

*Journey*

All pictures are from the following website

[http://youtu.be/i\\_KrjxD8djo](http://youtu.be/i_KrjxD8djo)

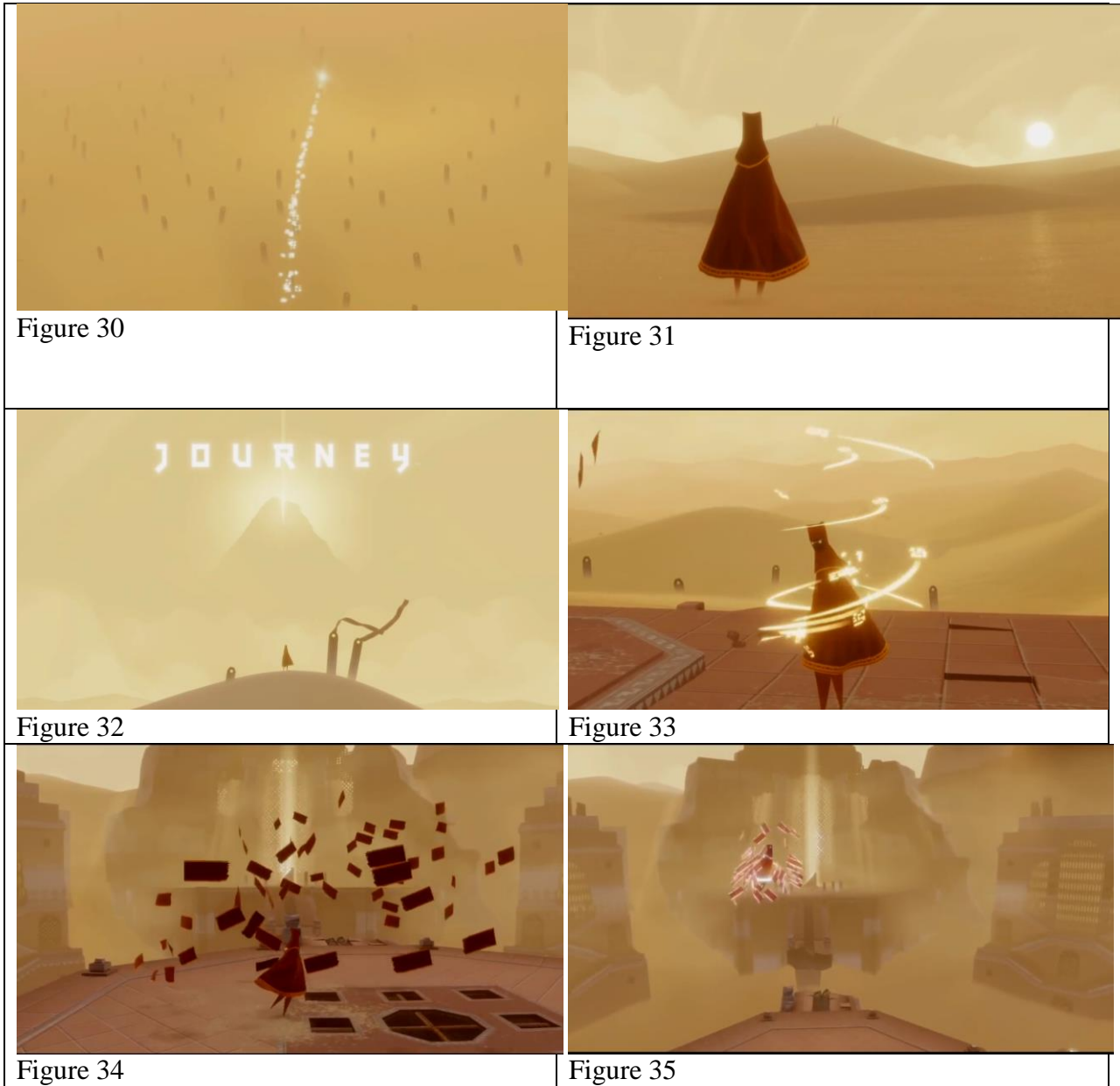




Figure 36



Figure 37



Figure 38



Figure 39



Figure 40



Figure 41



Figure 42



Figure 43



Figure 44



Figure 45



Figure 46



Figure 47



Figure 48



Figure 49



Figure 50



Figure 51

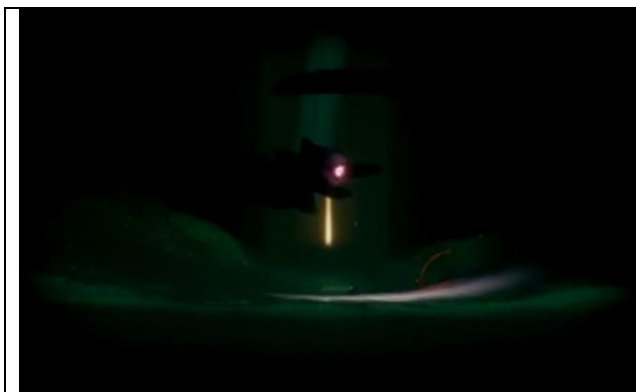


Figure 52



Figure 53



Figure 54

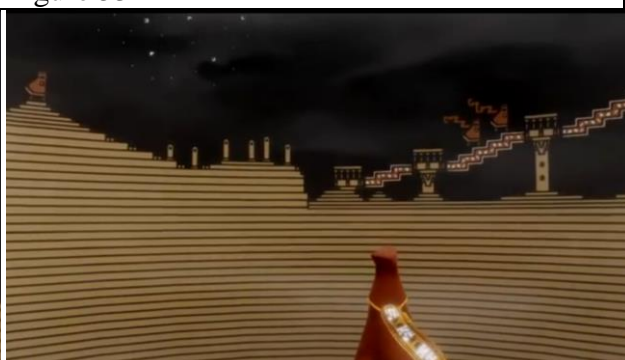


Figure 55



Figure 56



Figure 57



Figure 58



Figure 59





Figure 60



Figure 61



Figure 62



Figure 63



Figure 64



Figure 65



Figure 66



Figure 67

## Afterword

Even though I have tried to include as many examples as I could in this discussion, many other games that I have played could just as easily have been used. Here I would like to assemble, in no particular order, a list of honorable mentions for games that I have played which I believe to evidence artistic merit, yet have been completely omitted. For those who have been intrigued enough by this paper to pick up a controller or are just looking for a worthwhile experience, these are some of my personal favorites. I have included the system on which I played.

*Chrono Cross*. Playstation.

*Legend of Legaia*. Playstation.

*Kingdom Hearts* and *Kingdom Hearts II*. Playstation 2.

*Legend of Dragoon*. Playstation.

*Eternal Sonata*. Playstation 3.

*Tales of Graces F*. Playstation 3.

*Assassin's Creed II*. Playstation 3.

*The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. Nintendo 64.

*Ratchet and Clank* series. Playstation 2, 3.

*Resistance 3*. Playstation 3.

*Dragon Age Origins*. Playstation 3.

*Batman: Arkham Asylum*. Playstation 3.

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- Half-Life*. Sierra Entertainment, 1998.
- Heart of Darkness*. Interplay Entertainment, 1998. Playstation.
- Heavy Rain*. Sony Computer Entertainment, 2010.
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*Tales of Xillia*. Namco Bandai Games, 2013. Playstation 3.

*Thrust*. Firebird Software, 1986.

*Tomb Raider*. Eidos Interactive, 1996–2009. Multiple platforms.

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