Press Play:
Video Games and the Ludic Quality of Aesthetic Experiences across Media

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<u>Abstract</u>

This dissertation examines and disrupts the way key scholarly, technical, and cultural discourses distinguish video games as a medium from film by shifting critical attention to how these media are experienced during reception. This premise of this intervention is that a medium-specific outlook of video games suppresses significant dissimilarities among video games, and also overlooks video games' lineage in relation to how other media are experienced as aesthetic expressions. This has also meant that the vast critical resources within film and media studies remains extensively underutilized within video game scholarship. Beyond noting crucial formal resonances between certain video games and films, this project enhances our understanding of both forms by critiquing the specific presumptions used to define video games in significant by powerful cultural gatekeepers including the United States Supreme Court and the Museum of Modern Art. The premises challenged include the notion that video games are all principally games, that video games have a computational materiality that warrants a distinct critical approach compared to film, that video games are designed to be interactive in way that other aesthetic forms are not, that video games provide a way of inhabiting fictional worlds that films cannot, and that video games lack a capacity to reflect our historical world back to us in manner comparable to film's documentary capacity. The point is not to suppress distinctions between film and video games, but to understand overlooked facets common to the forms as experienced, thus better situating video games in relation to film studies.

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Preface

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INTRODUCTION
Video Games and Film Studies

This dissertation seeks to disrupt the critical, technical, and cultural discursive practices used to distinguish video games from films by shifting attention to the shared experiential facets of these forms. Beyond merely noting similarities between certain video games and films, this dissertation will enhance our apprehension of both forms by demonstrating that many ostensible distinctions between them rely on misguided notions about what video games are, and how we encounter them. Utilizing several different approaches to both video games and film reception, the chapters of this dissertation each critique some of the pervasive assumptions used to differentiate video games as expressive media, as cultural objects, and as formal experiences. The premises challenged include the notion that we experience video games principally by playing them as games, that video games have a computational materiality that warrants a distinct critical approach compared to film, that video games are designed to be interactive in way that other aesthetic forms are not, that video games provide a way of inhabiting fictional worlds that films cannot, and that video games lack a capacity to reflect our historical world back to us in manner comparable to film's documentary capacity. The point is not to suppress distinctions between film and video games, but to understand overlooked facets common to these receptive experiences, thus better situating video games in relation to film studies.

0.1 PLAYING THE GAME: LINEAGES FOR VIDEO GAMES

Roughly seven decades after physicist William Higinbotham and Robert Dvorak developed *Tennis for Two* (1958) at the Brookhaven National Laboratory in Long Island, New York, video games remain a distinctly challenging cultural form for scholars to apprehend through existing disciplinary configurations.[1] As it stands, several branches within the humanities, social sciences, and the sciences have made the case for providing the most fitting home for the study of video games, which is one reason the appendix of the 2009 anthology *Video Game Theory Reader 2* provides what is effectively a list of dozens of potential disciplinary homes along with short explanatory blurbs by respective academic proponents.[2] This is perhaps not all that surprising considering a given video game could justifiably be studied as a game, a narrative, a social networking platform, a graphical interface, a series of (graphical) moving images, a set of software protocols, a representation, a simulation, a virtual world, and even an artwork. For most scholars, the complications caused by video games' manifold identities provides ample justification for either implicitly or explicitly regarding video games as a unique and distinguishable medium. The problem with this medium-specific outlook is not only that it suppresses crucial dissimilarities among video games, but also that it overlooks video games' lineage in relation to other expressive media.[3] In particular this has meant

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[1] In most accounts of video game history, *Tennis for Two* is identified as the first video game. Mark JP Wolf, *The Medium of the Video Game* (University of Texas Press, 2001), xi.
I will use the term "video game" in a descriptive sense referring to those cultural objects thought of as video games. We could say this refers to any electronic game or narrative relying on computation to produce a visual and/or aural expression and appears responsive user input. I am not drawing distinctions between arcade, computer and video games (although I recognize the historical reasons for doing so), because these forms are no longer distinguished in any popular discourse.

[2] Bernard Perron and Mark J. P. Wolf, *The Video Game Theory Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 331-88.

[3] By "expressive media" I am referring to any established process for communicating and disseminating messages, ideas, and/or experiences. That is to say, media that can disseminate expressions. Whether an expression is functional, aesthetic, and/or authored is something we will deal with over the course of the dissertation.

that the vast critical resources within film and media studies remain extensively underutilized within

video game scholarship.

One way to articulate how popular and scholarly discourses currently position video games

in relation to other forms of media is to recognize the formulation already ingrained into the

language we use to describe the video game experience as "playing a game." At the risk of sounding

pedantic, returning to the deceptively simple and frequently overlooked terms "play" and "game" at

the outset is important because it reminds us just how many of the taxonomical constructions of

media categories we continue to take for granted. Of course, pointing out that the terms *game* and

play are difficult to define is hardly a revelation; after all, just about every scholarly work focused on

related topics will at some point recount how, in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations,*[4] the

term and concept *game* served as the prototypical illustration for language's lack of specificity. True

to form, I am also beginning my inquiry with this reference. However, instead of disputing

Wittgenstein's central thesis about "games," I will reveal an even more expansive notion of *games* and

play than Wittgenstein's, one that provides the footing for revealing critically overlooked connections

between video games and film forged directly through these terms.

0.1.1 Video Games and *Gameplay*

While Wittgenstein's brief discussion of games mostly serves as a pretense for his larger analysis

of communication and language, it still offers a succinct analysis of the difficulties in defining what

constitutes a *game.* In short, Wittgenstein explains that those activities we call and think of as

typical *games*—chess, tennis, ring-around-the-rosy, and hide-and-seek being some of his

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[4] For example, see Ian Bogost, *How to Talk About Videogames*, vol. 47;47.; (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 124-5; Grant Tavinor, *The Art of Videogames* (John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 86; Gordon Calleja, *In-Game : From Immersion to Incorporation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), 8; George Skaff Elias, Richard Garfield, and Karl Robert Gutschera, *Characteristics of Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press,, 2012), 5.

examples—lack clear, unanimously shared characteristics, and suggest only a "complicated network of similarities." For every identifiable reoccurring attribute like "competition," "rules," "amusement," "skill," "luck," or "patience," there is an inevitable counter-example: a *game* which lacks the particular attribute in question, but nonetheless shares other common *game-related* characteristics. In other words, no single characteristic is shared by all *games*, but each *game* shares characteristics with other games. (If Wittgenstein were to imagine *games* as a Venn diagram based on *game-related* qualities, the diagram would lack any universally shared component.) This leads Wittgenstein to the conclusion that despite networks of "overlapping and crisscrossing… similarities," *games* cannot be defined outright. Thus, he famously deems all *games* to be part of a "family," united only by "family resemblances."[5]

In spite of this assertion, however, what Wittgenstein's *games* have in common is their relationship with *gameplay*, the playful mode of experience that is shared by each of Wittgenstein's examples. We *play* chess, we *play* ring-around-the-rosy, we *play* tennis; the *games* Wittgenstein is initially describing are all activities that are *played* because they entail a mode of engagement that we think of as *gameplay*. On the other hand, *gameplay* may not be the most effective characteristic for defining *games* considering *play*—and by extension *gameplay*—is just as nebulous a term as *game*. This critique is compounded by the additional point that the German language, in which Wittgenstein was writing, uses the same signifier, "*speil*," to connote both *play* and *game* interchangeably. As it happens, the nebulousness inherent in *speil* is exactly what many critical theorists have relied on in

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[5] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), sections 66-67. It is precisely the nebulousness and flexibility of "games" that leads Wittgenstein to assert the practicality in the "the analogy between language and games." Accordingly, he argues that communication itself occurs through "language-games" with shifting, relational rules, which can be employed strategically to various ends. Without belaboring the significance of this analogy, it is worth recognizing that making the analogy between language and games can have some fairly significant consequences considering how this equation relativizes what can be accomplished through the use of language, potentially reorienting critical theory inquiry more broadly. If language is a game, perhaps all criticism should be understood as form of play, which would makes sense because, to Wittgenstein, communication via language entails something like *playing* a game where we operate according to implicit or explicit rules. Ibid., sections 71, 81-83.

their theories of experience, something we see in, for example, Miriam Hansen's comprehensive exegesis of the writings of Walter Benjamin—demonstrating how his use of *spiel* connotes any or all of the terms "'play,' 'game,' 'performance,' and 'gamble.'"[6] There is a comparable muddling of "game" and "play" in the French word *jeu*. This enables certain abstract elasticity, as demonstrated in the translator's note to Derrida's foundational post-structuralist essay, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," which explains that "the word 'jeu' is variously translated…as 'play,' 'interplay,' 'game,' and 'stake,' besides the normative translation 'freeplay.'"[7] Of course, *speil* and *jeu* appeal to Benjamin and Derrida, precisely because of these terms' elasticity as signifiers, however it also means that it may seem futile or tautological to define *game* in terms of *play*. It would seem that, when it comes to *gameplay*, *game* and *play* are incapable of being disentangled.

Still, when it comes to how these words are used in relation to video games in the English language, there often does appears to be more of a lexical distinction between *games* and *play*. In common usage, *game* is more likely to be used as a noun (and the subject of a sentence) connoting the activity itself, while *play* is usually the verb (and the predicate of a sentence) referring to the mode of engagement.[8] The suggestion is that video games are types of *games*, and, as such, they are designated activities that one engages in through *play*. Consequently, *Tetris* (Alexey Pajitnov, 1984),

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[6] Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, vol. 44 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 183.

[7] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, ed. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

[8] Regarding *gameplay*, it is worth acknowledging, however, the less frequent usage of both terms in which *play* is used as a noun/subject and *game* is used as a verb/predicate. For instance, in a sport like American Football, one can "make a *play*" or "run a *play*." Also, a turn or a move within in a board game might be called "*a play*."

"Gaming," meanwhile is gerund used to connote the act of playing video games. This leads to further associations where "gamers" are those whose identities revolve around an interest in video games ("*gamers* are those enjoy *gaming*"). My chief motivation for avoiding this connotation is because of the incendiary identity politics around the term "gamer," which has increasingly become associated with a "toxic" subculture. Mia Consalvo, "Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture: A Challenge for Feminist Game Studies Scholars," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no. 1 (2012). This became particularly the case after the "Gamer-Gate" controversy which self-identified "gamers" lashed out at woman and minority influences within video game culture. See Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2015). Without discounting the importance of these politics, they are not my primary focus in thinking about these terms here.

Super Mario Bros. (Nintendo, 1985) and *Bioshock* (2K Boston, 2007) are all *games* that can be *played* much in the same way that chess, tennis, and *Monopoly* are *games* that can be *played*.

The unquestioned assumption in this formulation is that video games are undoubtedly part of Wittgenstein's "family" of games, and that *playing* a video game should inevitably be apprehended in terms of *gameplay*. This would mean that we *play* video games in the same or comparable manner to how we engage with a single-player game like spider solitaire, a competitive team-sport like football, a strategic battle of wits like chess, an individual sport like tennis, a role-playing campaign like *Dungeons and Dragons*, a logical puzzle like Sudoku, or a chance-filled board-game like *Monopoly*. The fact that each of these activities has been adapted on several occasions into video games— including in the *Madden NFL* series (EA, 1988-), *Battle Chess to* (Interplay, 1988), *Baldur's Gate* (1998, Bioware)—simply serves as evidence supporting the primary assumption that video games belong to this "family" of *games* we associate with *gameplay*.

However, there are also consequences and questions raised by this formulation. Are we to understand that the computational machine used to process and render a video game is effectively an extension of the activity's apparatus? That is, is the computer or Xbox akin to a deck of cards because, like the deck of cards, various *games* can be *played* using the same material components?

Another point is that, in contrast to those video games just mentioned which adapt pre-existing games, many video games have a less concrete association with recognizable gaming conventions and the mode of experience we think of as *gameplay*. For example, the fairly popular video game *Euro-Truck Simulator 2* (2012, SCS Software) promises to give "you," the player, "the chance to become a real truck driver from the comfort of your home…making you feel as if you were driving the trucks in real life!"[9] To most people, the idea of driving an 18-wheeler across

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[9] This language is taken from the video game's website. http://eurotrucksimulator.com retrieved from the internet 8/3/2017

Europe to deliver cargo on a deadline—and potentially sitting in hours of virtual traffic, accompanied only by the program's piped-in live radio—is quite literally the opposite of what one might associate with the way we *play* most of the family of *games*. What is easier to recognize is that *Euro-Truck Simulator 2* delivers something of a guided imagining of an experience through a mostly visual interface. Similarly, other examples within the "simulator" genre allow players to virtually access non-*game*-related experiences like being a crane operator, a pastry chef, a car mechanic, a train passenger, or a gay dad looking for love.[10]

Yet another reason to question the privileged relationship between video games and *gameplay* comes from the recognition that narrative video games will include experiences more commonly associated with other expressive aesthetic forms. For instance, during the over eight hours of cinematic sequences interspersed through *Metal Gear Solid 4* (Konami, 2008), the "player" merely watches a convoluted melodrama about a terminally-ill spy trying to avert global catastrophe by destroying major arm manufacturers before he dies. Should this activity, and the spectatorial experience of watching 40-minute cut-scenes, be understood only in terms of *gameplay*?

The very existence of these questions suggests the need for a more nuanced conception of what occurs when we "play a video game." Instead of assuming that all video games are traditional *games*, and that we simply *play* them in the same way we *play* ring-around-the-rosy, tennis, chess or solitaire, looking closely at individual encounters with video games tends to provide a vastly more complex conception of the ranges of experience included by the encounter. What is more remarkable, though, is that a crucially overlooked aspects of video games' lineage—aspects which more readily correspond with other expressive media like film—may also be found within the term

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[10] These are all experiences that are sought in simulation games. Specifically, *Construction Simulator: 2015* (Software Entwicklung GmbH, 2014), Car Mechanic Simulator (PlayWay S.A, 2014), Train Simulator (Dovetail Games, 2009) *Dream Daddy*: *A Dad Dating Simulator* (Game Grumps, 2017)

play itself. However, to make this observation, we must recognize additional valences for the term *play*.

0.1.2 Video Games and Playing a Record

In the English language, not everything we *play* is a *game*.[11] For one thing, musical instruments are *played*, and this act is not considered a type of *gameplay*. Neither, for that matter, is the act of screening a film. Yet, films are *played* in theaters or we might inquire, "what time is that film *playing*?" We also *play* certain media when we press a button marked "play" or the graphical symbol ► (a rightward-pointing triangle) on a remote, on a VCR, or on graphical user-interfaces (GUI). Similarly, when we sit at home and choose to watch a film—via a streaming service, laserdisc, DVD, Blu-ray, Betamax, video tape 16mm—we *play* the film. Records, tapes, films, and .mp3 (sound) files are all *played*. We also *play* books on tape, we *play* last night's recorded surveillance footage, and we *play* our favorite podcasts. This type of *play* is that which prompts the expression of some recorded durational content through some technological medium. Yet this connotation seems to have some delimiting parameters: unless a television show is recorded ahead of time on our DVR, we are not the ones who *play* a television show. When a television show is broadcast live and our TV is *on*—it is *airing*—not usually *playing*. At the same time, a movie on television might be *playing* on a channel, just as a song might be *playing* on the radio, but we, the home audience, are not the ones *playing* that movie (even if we might be admonished for *playing* the radio too loud). The radio *plays* as we listen, but it is the broadcasting channel or the DJ that decides what to *play* over the airwaves.

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[11] Nor does something have to be thought of like a game for it to be played. I am not just referring to "gamification" or transforming non-game activities to have more qualities associated with game as talked about by Ian Bogost recently. Ian Bogost, *Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, the Uses of Boredom, and the Secret of Games* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

In the Oxford English Dictionary's entry for *play* (as a verb), it mentions that the use corresponding to "playing a record"—and soon afterward "playing a movie"—dates back to the turn of the 20th century, right around the time that phonographs and films came into mass production. One plausible explanation for how this lexical pattern emerged relates to the more performative connotations of *play,* those associated with music recitals and operating a musical instrument, as when one "plays a violin," a phrase that has been around for centuries. [12] If what people were listening to on those early gramophones was indeed recorded music, it seems likely that language shifted from "listen to a recording of a piano playing" to "listen to a record playing" to "playing a record." This syntactic progression appears inevitable in retrospect, but we should be careful not to overlook the significance of the foreshortening rooted into the word "play" itself. We may hear a violin being *played* through speakers connected to a record-*player* as the record *plays* a recording session of a violinist *playing*. We are listening to the violinist *playing*—yet there is no violinist; there is only the mediating apparatus and the material facsimile of that original performance. The act of *playing* has been transcribed, and the play is transplanted from the violinist first to the recording, then to the media apparatus, and perhaps finally to the listener who can decide when and how to *play* the record. The musician at once *plays* a song, a concert—the musician *plays* Mozart—but with the recording, it is now the consumer who *plays* the record on the gramophone, we *play* the song, we *play* the concert, and we *play* Mozart.[13] Consider how a record's grooves are deciphered, converted, and expressed as soundwaves through some mediating apparatus, and through this process, the performative mode of play is transferred, transported, and transmuted.

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[12] Oxford English Dictionary, *"Play, V."* (Oxford University Press), IIIa, IIIc.

[13] There is a connection to being a DJ and sampling in hip hop music that is worth considering more. One resource for this would be Russel Potter's work talking about hip hop and "play." Russell A Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (Suny Press, 1995).

When video games are placed in a lineage of expressive media, "playing a video game" provides a vastly different understanding compared to that implied by *gameplay*. As an expressive form, the video game is not so much an *activity* as it is a recorded schema, one that has been transcribed perhaps into the readable surface of an optical disc, within the memory of a cartridge, or as the source code in a downloadable program. The video game itself is raw data, a schema of information, that has been encoded and distributed. It will be decoded as it is processed by a computational apparatus—rendered into expressive images and sounds—before it is experienced.

In this way, it is comparable to visual data imprinted onto celluloid that is eventually experienced as a film. The video game's data must be processed both by a computer and then by a player to be experienced, perhaps not unlike how the film must be rendered by the bright light of the projector and processed by the spectator in order to be experienced. For both film and video games, the recorded data is calibrated to engender a range of receptive experiences. As we will explore elsewhere in this dissertation, connecting video games with film is about recognizing video games within a lineage of media encoded with durational recordings of expressions, expressions that should be understood as *authored aesthetic experiences.*

The point here is that "playing a film" may have more in common with "playing a video game" than one might expect if *playing a video game* can reclaim the lineage of recorded durational media. At the same time, though, it also important to recognize that *gameplay* and media/performative valences of play are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and video games can still forge resonances to film through *gameplay.* This is because film itself may have more of a relationship with gameplay than commonly acknowledged.

0.1.3 (Inter)activity, Gameplay, and Film

As we will see through this dissertation, the justification for separating video games from film often hinges on some argument related to the term "interactive." While it usually remains unclear if the interactivity being compared is found in the materiality of the respective forms or in the receptive experiences of those forms, the assumption is that video games provide interactivity which is absent in film and other "old" or "traditional" media.

One way to articulate the approximate logic behind this supposition is to again note the subtle differences in the connotation of "playing a film" compared to "playing a video game" that suggest agentic activity during the act of *playing*. Imagine that after setting up a movie to watch on a DVD, I then *play* the film by pressing a button on a remote control corresponding to the command. At that moment, I am *playing the film*. However, once it has begun *playing*, it is the movie itself, the DVD, the DVD player, and/or the television that is *playing* the film. I may be watching the movie *play*, but I am no longer the one *playing* the movie.[14] Once my input is completed, it is the recorded durational expression and the mediating apparatus that are *playing*.

Now consider what happens during a comparable occasion when I sit down to *play* a video game—an event that may very well rely on the same processing console and television used to watch a movie on a DVD. Instead of merely pressing *play*[15] and beholding the expression as it and the apparatus *plays*, as the video game player, I am called upon to provide regular input and perform certain actions to both *play* the video game and allow it to be *played*.[16] I am responding to the aural and visual information conveyed through a screen and speakers as I press buttons on my controller

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[14] The exception to this may be when we are *playing* a movie for others to see because, in such an instance, we seem to express agency in *playing* the film. This allows the act of screening to function more as a performative act where the film's continued expression becomes a reflection of our agency and our continued cooperation.

[15] Depending on the video game, the command to start the game within the menu interface might read as some variation of "Begin the Game" or "Press Start," but it may also be "Press Play."

[16] In chapter 2 we will acknowledge why this is different from old media apparatuses which require constant physical action like hand-cranked gramophones, or paper books.

and input the commands that continue the expression of the video game over some duration. When I *play* a video game, I could be said to *play* it in the same way the DVD player *plays* the information encoded on a disc. The video game's code is processed by hardware and rendered onto a screen, but the video game's expression is only sustained by players' continued cooperation and action. The video game *plays* only as players *play* it. In this way, players are materially a part of the mediating apparatus; they are that which renders the encoded data in the service of the expression. One could even make the case that the human agency expressed while *playing* a video game is a return to the agentic human performance displaced by the automated gramophone player. It may be true that *playing* music, whether on a violin or on a home stereo, is a performative act, but, as such, it only remains *playing* through a sustained expression of agency by the player. The violinist plays throughout the whole song, while those of us playing a gramophone record only press that button marked "play" to allow the record to play. The video game players play the video game to enable its expression not unlike how musicians *play* the notes written in their sheet music.[17]

The assumption is, then, that video games are interactive (or provide interactive experiences) because they rely on the continued agentic activity on the reception end simply to be expressed. The problem with this idea is, however, that determining what counts as the receiver's agentic activity during reception is significantly more difficult when it comes to forms of cultural expression and the aesthetic experience. Since we will return this point on more than one occasion in this dissertation, it

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[17] Indeed, we find versions of this argument in Jay Bolter's argument about navigating hypertext as being akin to playing music. See J. David Bolter, *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print*, vol. 2nd (Mahwah, N.J: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), 99-110. Also, this is an argument made by the attorneys representing the video game industry in their effort to defend video game playing (in addition to video game production) as an expression free speech in the Supreme Court case concerning video game censorship which we will discuss extensively in Chapter 1. In their brief, they argue that "playing a video game is like improvising a performance of a musical score, because the player engages in and contributes to the expressive activity rather than passively consuming it. Video game play is also like a musical performance in that it requires an element of physical skill and virtuosity, such that accomplished players have more expressive options than novices." *Brown V. Entertainment Merchants Ass'n*, 131 S. Ct. 2729, 3 (2011).

is worth foregrounding the reasons why some question the efficacy of interactivity as a distinguishing quality for distinguishing video games from film.

Lev Manovich, for one, describes the "myth" of interactivity in the *The Language of New Media* as follows:

> *In contrast to traditional media where the order of presentation was fixed, the user can now interact with a media object. In the process of interaction the user can choose which elements to display or which paths to follow, thus generating a unique work. Thus the user becomes the co-author of the work.*[18]

For Manovitch, the entire premise that new media is uniquely interactive fails to account for how all aesthetic forms are experienced regardless of media. Relying principally on the ideas of E.H. Gombrich—a figure we return to in Chapter 3—Manovich points out that "all classical, and even more so modern art, was already 'interactive' in a number of ways [including] ellipses in literary narration, missing details of objects in visual art and other representational 'shortcuts' that required the user to fill-in the missing information."[19] Simply put, for Manovich, interactivity in relation to aesthetic objects can be "psychological," and it should be understood as a function of the receptive experience, as opposed to a "literal" condition of the material medium. It is for this reason we find strains of reception studies across forms that have long argued that all kinds of media reception engender interactivity.

As we will discuss more in Chapters 2 and 3, this psychological and aesthetic conception of interactivity is consistently linked less with performativity, and more with ludic categories and *gameplay*. The beholder's activity is consistently a form of *playful* (inter)activity. This helps explain why several film scholars identify aspects of interactivity within films that are particularly associated

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[18] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Leonardo (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 66. For Manovich this myth is used primarily to serves a teleological narrative about technological progress in the computer age. Within this narrative new media is cast as more democratic because it allows for two-way participation in the production and consumption of knowledge, compared to the indoctrinating qualities of the one-way stream of "old" media.
[19] Ibid., 71.

with *gameplay* and other ludic categories.[20] For instance, certain directors like Michael Haneke,

Christopher Nolan, Lars Von Trier and Quentin Tarantino have each been associated with ludic

categories based on films that upend conventions, provide byzantine twists, and mislead their

audiences.[21] The basic premise behind these arguments is that, even as film, as a material medium,

may lack the literal agentic activity found in a computational form like video games, films are

interactive when they "play games" with us as an audience. In this way, *gameplay* and *interactivity* are

not impediments to connecting video games and film, but outlets for demonstrating convergences

among certain kinds of films.

Thomas Elsaesser, for one, relates a certain trend of cinematic experiences directly to

"games" as he identifies a fairly broad slate of filmmakers who use narrative blocks and reveal to

"disorient or mislead spectators" in what he terms "mind-game films." To Elsaesser, the films are

themselves types of *games* and spectators are active in *playing* along: "spectators on the whole do not

mind being 'played with'; on the contrary, they rise to the challenge." The mind-game films often

require repeat viewings to untangle the narrative twists that change the spectator's experience on

subsequent viewings. This narrative complexity engenders a particular mode of engagement as

spectators pay fastidious attention to themes and motifs as clues foreshadowing the "real" story that

remains hidden in plain sight. It is mode of viewership that "provokes a different, more direct form

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20. See especially, Adam Lowenstein, *Dreaming of Cinema: Spectatorship, Surrealism, & the Age of Digital Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). Marsha Kinder, "Narrative Equivocations between Movies and Games," *The new media book* (2002). Nitzan S. Ben-Shaul, "Hyper-Narrative Interactive Cinema Problems and Solutions," Rodopi; Nitzan S. Ben-Shaul, *Cinema of Choice : Optional Thinking and Narrative Movies* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012). Several critics and film scholars have made the case that the recurrence of these characteristics within the last couple of decades is specifically related to new media and video games also seems that we have ended up with a number of different names for similar phenomenon of complex narratives in film. David Denby calls these films "narrative disorder," Patricia Pisters calls them "the mosaic film," and Angela Ndalianis talks about them in terms of "neo-Baroque aesthetics." David Denby, "The New Disorder: Adventures in Film Narrative," *The New Yorker* 5 (2007); Patricia Pisters, "The Mosaic Film: Nomadic Style and Politics in Transnational Media Culture," *Thamyris/Intersecting: Place, Sex and Race* 23, no. 1 (2011). Angela Ndalianis, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004).
21 Warren Buckland, ed. *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling Contemporary Cinema* (2009); Brigitte Peucker, "Games Haneke Plays: Reality and Performance," in *A Companion to Michael Haneke* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Berg Charles Ramírez, "A Taxonomy of Alternative Plots in Recent Films: Classifying the "Tarantino Effect"," *Film Criticism* 31, no. 1/2 (2006).

of participation from the spectator" than the classical Hollywood narrative or a more standard movie. Even as Elsaesser identifies this as a "new" type of experience, he also concedes that "the genealogy of the mind-game film includes such venerable master-magicians of surprise, suspense, and the double-take as Fritz Lang, Luis Buñuel, Alfred Hitchcock, and Orson Welles, as well as 1950s/1960s 'art cinema' films by Akira Kurosawa, Alain Resnais, and Ingmar Bergman."[22] What is "new" about these mind game films is really only the ostensible mainstreaming of this mode which plays with filmic conventions to surprise and frustrate the audience's expectations. While Michelangelo Antonioni's and Buñuel's films were shown in art-house theaters, Cristopher Nolan's and Quinten Tarantino's films are tent-pole blockbusters distributed in wide release.

In fact, several film scholars have noted a nearly identical lineage to the one that Elsaesser associates with mind-game films. Marsha Kinder, for one, dubs a similar group of films "database narratives," which she explains as "narratives whose structure exposes the dual processes of selection and combination that lie at the heart of all stories and are crucial to language: Certain characters, images, sounds, events and settings are selected from series of categories and combined to generate specific tales."[23] Another name for these films comes from Nitzan Ben-Shaul who describes "hyper-narrative interactive cinema" which is "based on a cognitive-constructivist approach to narrative and the viewer's activity," are films "designed…[to play] with the viewer's strive to construct a cohering, intelligible, goal oriented trajectory out of the film's audiovisual flow by introducing surprises distractions, diversions and postponements along the way."[24] Others who have identified an uptick in films with similar descriptions include David Denby who describes a trend of films of "narrative disorder," Patricia Pisters who identifies the "mosaic film," and Angela

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[22] Thomas Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Warren Buckland (2009), 15-16.

[23] SeeMarsha Kinder, "Designing a Database Cinema," in *The New Media Book*, ed. Dan Harries (London: BFI Pub., 2002), 6.

[24] Ben-Shaul, "Hyper-Narrative" 83.

Ndalianis talks about similar films in terms of "neo-Baroque aesthetics."[25] In each of these various approaches, a complex narrative form engenders a more active mode of spectatorship.

While recognizing this tendency is helpful to some degree, it also perpetuates a misguided notion that interactivity and playful modes of cinema spectatorship are merely correlate functions of complex storytelling. More likely it is the case, as Kinder implicitly acknowledges, that these "mind-game" films merely exhibit specific modes of play more conspicuously than other films because these complex narratives more reflexively "[reveal] the arbitrariness of the choices made, and the possibility of making other combinations which would create alternative stories."[26] What this dissertation will explore more in Chapter 3 is that narrative complexity is not the only aspect of *gameplay* relevant to film spectatorship. Further, if too much attention is paid to the use of complex narratives, other ludic qualities pertinent to understanding the resonance between films and video games remain overlooked.[27]

At the same time, it is crucial to acknowledge several facets and types of *gameplay* found in both film and video games. More importantly, only particular modes of *gameplay* in some video games should be understood as relevant to film. This is why one of the consistent points this dissertation will return to concerns the limitations wrought by grouping all video games together in the first place.

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[25] Denby, "The New Disorder: Adventures in Film Narrative."; Pisters, "The Mosaic Film: Nomadic Style and Politics in Transnational Media Culture." Ndalianis, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*.

[26] Marsha Kinder, "Hot Spots, Avatars, and Narrative Fields Forever: Buñuel's Legacy for New Digital Media and Interactive Database Narrative," *FILM QUART* 55, no. 4 (2002): 6.

[27] As we will talk about more in the Chapters 1 and 3, Roger Caillois' work is particularly helpful for recognizing the different playful modes of experience engendered by filmic form.

0.1.4 Divisions among Video Games: (De)limiting Frameworks

For a moment in the 2000s, the meta-discourse concerning the scholarly approach to video games was effectively cast as a binary debate between two frameworks: ludology and narratology.[28] Scholars like Epsen Aarseth and Gonzalo Frasca used a ludic-based approach to video games which focused on gameplay and apparently took care in recognizing the player as an agent in an interactive system.[29] Alternatively, scholars including Henry Jenkins and Marie-Laure Ryan were positioned as thinkers contextualizing video games within a tradition of storytelling forms, media convergence, and complex narrative structures.[30] If nothing else, the ludology and narratology debates were used to articulate ostensibly divergent institutional avenues for video games in the academy—the narratologists advocated for video games to join an ongoing scholarly discourse found in literature and media studies, while the ludologists sought to define a more autonomous space centered around gameplay and computation.[31]

To the extent that the ludology versus narratology dichotomy ever really existed—a point later disputed even by those heavily identified with the debate[32]—it reflected the reasonable

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[28] The debate has itself been documented from both the narratological and ludic-centric sides. Marie-Laure Ryan, "Computer Games as Narrative: The Ludology Versus Narrativism Controversy," in *Avatars of Story* (U of Minnesota Press, 2006). Gonzalo Frasca, "Ludologists Love Stories, Too: Notes from a Debate That Never Took Place" (paper presented at the DiGRA conference, 2003). Here we will discuss this debate mostly as historical matter without getting into all of the nuances of each argument.

[29] The works that typify this perspective are Gonzalo Frasca, "Simulation Versus Narrative," *The video game theory reader* (2003); Espen Aarseth, "Computer Game Studies, Year One," *Game studies* 1, no. 1 (2001). At least this is how it is characterized in Matthew Kapell's more retrospective on the debate. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell, "Introduction: The Ludic and Narrative as Sialective About 'What Games Do'," in *The Play Versus Story Divide in Game Studies: Critical Essays* (McFarland, 2015).

[30] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006); Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*, Parallax Re-Visions of Culture and Society Ser (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative across Media : The Languages of Storytelling*, Frontiers of Narrative (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

[31] Since the digital humanities (or humanities computing) was still a relatively marginal presence within humanities departments, the thought may have been that narratologists would ignore the technological aspects of video games while the ludic perspective would be far more receptive to those working on the production end of video games including engineers, programmers, and designers.

[32] See for instance Espen Aarseth, "Ludology," in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. Mark JP Wolf and Bernard Perron (Routledge, 2014).

apprehension of video game scholars trying both to justify an interest in a rather stigmatized cultural form and to protect this object from being engulfed by more established discourses. The concern among the ludic faction of video game scholars seems to have been that interloping literature and film scholars would carelessly apply prefabricated cultural readings to the representational signifiers in video games without truly understanding the form.[33] This view, however, relied on a myopic conception of literature and film scholarship, a point evidenced by the shallow reduction of literature and film to narratology. After all, film studies scholars are by no means principally concerned with narrative, nor do all films (or works of literature) have identifiable narratives.

More than a decade since the height of the debate, video games have become more entrenched as a cultural form, one considered worthy of recognition and study, without finding a dependable discursive home in the academy. One reason for this is the consequences of positioning video games as a "medium" have never really been well articulated. Consequently, those scholarly approaches that effectively cordon off video games within academic journals, book series, or individual articles, continue to take for granted that what unites these objects is apparent. Partly this is motivated by the rhetorical convenience for scholars within an emerging discourse to operate under the assumption that a coherent medium called "video games" actually exists. Meanwhile this stance ignores difficult questions about what makes the video game distinct and distinguishable enough as a medium to justify grouping together all these disparate objects engendering diverse and manifold experiences. Without realizing it, scholars may have conceded basic taxonomical discussions and doubts about medium specificity by relying on the conventional wisdom of the cultural hive-mind. In truth, the public's notion of media is effectively provided by whoever moderates Wikipedia, names Amazon's departments, designs the App Store's menu, or decides how to stock the aisles in Wal-Mart. This way, scholarly reference to "video games" is merely descriptive

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[33] Kapell, "Introduction: The Ludic and Narrative as Sialective About 'What Games Do'."

of a cultural phenomenon, and it thus avoids having to prescribe a system of classification based on coherent theories of media, aesthetics, representation, or games.[34]

As we will discuss in the coming chapters, even as video games have been given implicit stamps of approval by various cultural gatekeepers—the US Supreme Court and The Museum of Modern Art, for example—what fundamentally unites these objects remains an open question. Does the category of video game really have such defining qualities that it justifies tethering together a puzzle/skill title like *Tetris* (1984), and a long-running, expansive, networked-multi-player, role-playing, virtual universe like *Eve Online* (2003); the arcade classic *Pac-Man* (1980) and the sprawling, procedurally generated customizable worlds of *Minecraft* (2011); the competitive arcade fighting game *Street Fighter II* (1991) and the point-and-click, solo adventure narrative *Another World* (1991)? Maybe not, but, to cite one example, these titles are classified together as "video game software" in MoMA's permanent collection effectively binding these objects together with a singular identity within the eyes of both the institution and the public. One consequence of an overly rigid attachment to medium specificity is, then, that it suppresses important distinction amongst objects based on their shared descriptive term.

To some extent, video game fans and critics have relied on genres and endless sub-categorization to deal with the tremendous diversity of forms that get culturally bound together as "video games." We find popular notions of genre relied upon to encompass a host of incomparable characteristics including narrative patterns, level design, production process, platform, gameplay mechanics, visual style, or the player's primary perspective. Really this creates inchoate video game genres based on an assortment of characteristics with descriptions like "first-person," "rogue-like,"

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[34] As it stands now, scholars focusing on video games will often justify their object of interest by citing industry statistics about video games sales and the colossal figures of people who play video games. But these statistics strategically neglect to differentiate between a teenage boy who spends 4 hours each night playing *Call of Duty* with a group of online friends from the boy's mom who spends her subway commute playing angry birds on her phone. However, if we do not acknowledge how different these experiences are from one another, we are perpetuating the video game industry's capital interests in claims of diversity among video game players.

"casual," "simulator," "text-based," "open-world," "multiplayer," "sand-box," "retro," "arcade," "puzzle," and "indie." Each of these descriptors provides some detail about some aspect of the game, but none provides a level of insight about what the player can expect in the way that the moniker "Western" might for a film audience. This leads to situation in which a video game like *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011) might be described as a third/first-person, survival, sand-box, crafting game with optional multiplayer features that takes place in a procedurally-generated, open-world with a faux-retro style.

Deciding how to categorize video games is certainly not an easy task, but there have already been some valuable scholarly contributions making key distinctions among video games.[35] Jesper Juul's *A Casual Revolution*, for instance, does a lot of work providing a distinct history and analysis of the industry term "casual games," which are those more mainstream games ubiquitous on mobile devices that are "that are easy to learn to play, fit well with a large number of players and work in many different situations."[36] Juul's distinction between casual games and those "mimetic"/"hardcore" games—those known for creating more intricate worlds requiring a significant time investment—is important precisely because it does not rely on traditional genre distinctions, but rather on modes of engagement. Still, like most other critics writing about video games, Juul assumes that even casual games are necessarily part of a larger project, which is why he articulates his study of casual games as one "meant to capture what is happening with video games." In this way Juul still organizes all video games in relation only to each other, and neglects to consider whether there is an experiential justification for connecting all video games.

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[35] Nils Skare, "How to Define a Genre: A Lacanian-Marxist Case Study of the Nes Platform Game," 5, no. 1 (2011); Damien Djaouti, Julian Alvarez, and Jean-Pierre Jessel, "Classifying Serious Games: The G/P/S Model."

[36] Jesper Juul, *A Casual Revolution : Reinventing Video Games and Their Players* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010), 5. Usually they are identified by minimal narrative, short learning curve, direct and continuing interface with the player, point systems, combination of skill and chance. They can be played for short or long periods without much variation in the game mechanics. While it is possible to "beat" some of them, they foster a sense of the need for endless mastery and are arguably designed to be addictive.

As we will see in the Chapter 1, in the last few years the logic for cloistering video games from other forms of expression has been founded largely in argument about materiality and computation. We even see this strain of thought in those who are not as invested in medium-specificity like Alexander Galloway, who at one point argues that "video games are games, yes, but more importantly they are software systems…[and] the video game *Dope Wars* has more in common with the finance software *Quicken* than it does with traditional games like chess, roulette, or billiards."[37] Galloway's argument here is that video games have a stronger "family resemblance" to all other user-facing digital software than they do to either those cultural forms we think of as games or to other expressive forms of media like film.[38] The idea is that the underlying "algorithmic" form of video games—the seemingly complex logic of computer software—justifies an alternative critical framework for the analysis of this entire form. This logic is appealing, but, as we will continue to see in this dissertation, it also reduces video games to their underlying data and material composition in a manner that can be quite reductive because it suppresses any consideration of the way these forms are experienced.

In fact, it is quite telling that Galloway's illustration relies on a comparison between *Quicken*, a budget software, and *Dope Wars*, a text-based game concerning the economics of the drug trade.[39] It seems that these two examples of software were picked in part because of several resemblances pertaining to a shared interest in economic planning, financial calculations, and budgeting. A significantly more demanding comparison would be to ask whether a software version of chess has more in common with *Quicken* than it does with chess played on a marble chessboard. Or, for that

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[37] Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Electronic Mediations 18 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 6.

[38] Galloway at least contemplates a medium-specific approach to video games; he begins his work by explaining that, "if photographs are images, and films are moving images, then video games are actions. Let this be word one for video game theory." Ibid., 2.

[39] *Dope Wars* is an adaptation of *Drug Wars* (John E Dell, 1984). An additional point to note is that *Dope Wars* became popular in part because it was ported (adapted from one platform to another) to be played on graphing calculators.

matter, we might ask whether Galloway would go as far as to argue that the "interactive fiction" software version of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (Infocom, 1984), written by Douglas Adams, has more in common with *Quicken* than it does with Adams' novel or radio play versions of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*? Again, as we will discuss in Chapters 1 and 2, this tendency to overemphasize video games as computational software for the sake of media specificity, has a tendency to overlook how video games are engaged in practice. This is not to say that video games' materiality is irrelevant to how they are experienced; only that materiality is not always the principle driver of that experience.

Because this dissertation aims to demonstrate the importance of recognizing experiential resonances across media, it is worth making clear at the outset that some video games have far more in common with works found in other traditional divisions of media than they do with other video games. Take for example, *The Walking Dead* (Telltale, 2012-), a tightly scripted series of narrative video games in which the player makes difficult ethical choices for an escaped convict named Lee during a zombie apocalypse. This video game series has far more in common with its sources—the popular television show *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-), and the graphic novel series *The Walking Dead* (Robert Kirkman, 2003-)—than it has with an arcade video game *Pac-Man,* a casual puzzle video game like *Candy Crush Saga* (King, 2012), or a sports video game like *FIFA 2012* (EA, 2011). More importantly, this claim will not rely solely on narrative analysis; it simply acknowledges the host of formal qualities that should be considered in a close, critical analysis of video games when thinking about them in terms of players' experiences. Accordingly, a close reading of a given episode from Season 1 of *The Walking Dead* video game would entail looking at such qualities as camera angle, editing, voice acting, lighting, tone, style, and mise-en-scène—all elements consonant with a comprehensive scene analysis within a film studies discourse. Simply put, *The Walking Dead* video games have more to gain from scholarship relating to animation, television, film, and graphic novels,

than they do from any video game or ludic scholarship that ignores prior forms of expressive media. Acknowledging this point does not mean that scholars should ignore the aspects of *The Walking Dead* video game that are distinct to the video game's form; only that we need to avoid overvaluing those distinctions merely because they bolster an argument for medium specificity.

As much as it may work against the interests of scholars focused on studying video games to do so, we cannot always rely on medium specific frameworks that neglect crucial distinctions. Instead of insisting that all video games should be understood simply as *games*, stories, or software, it makes more sense understand video games through the modes of experience they engender—some of which are also plainly modes of experience engendered by film.

0.2   CHAPTER SUMMARIES

This project began not long after a confluence of fundamental cultural institutions in the United States publicly signaled for the first time their approval of video games as objects worthy of serious critical attention. Specifically, prior to 2012, several major universities began collections of video games within their library systems. Among these were several institutions with established film studies programs including the University of Chicago, the University of Michigan, and University of California at Santa Cruz.[40] Another historic occurrence from around the same moment—one we will discuss in detail in Chapter 1—was when the United States Supreme Court ruled that video games are a protected form of expression under the first amendment alongside film, paintings, and novels. Shortly afterward, but seemingly with no connection, the Museum of Modern Art in New York began adding video games to their permanent collection.

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[40] Other university libraries to begin collecting video games between 2008-2012 include those at the University of Illinois, the University of North Texas, the University of Delaware, and the University of Washington.

As already mentioned, however, it is hard to generalize about video games, which is why this dissertation critiques some the of the legal, industrial, and scholarly rhetoric that circumscribes video games as a medium. As a scholar with a background in film studies, I will be particularly attuned to the dominant assumptions within these discourses that continue to obscure the relevance of video games to film studies, and vice versa. These assumptions include video games' unmitigated relationship to *gameplay* compared to films' lack thereof, video games' interactive design and the presumption of the player's agency compared to the experience of the film spectator, and video games' lack of primary, indexical connection to the historical world compared to that which is assumedly maintained by film. By critiquing these assumptions, I demonstrate how better articulating the relationship between video games and film provides crucial insights into how both forms are experienced as aesthetic expressions.

Chapter 1 looks closely at the 2011 U.S. Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association*, which considered California's attempt to regulate the sale of "violent" video games as a way of evaluating two how to legally apprehend video games as a specific medium. While the Court's decision relied on the history of film censorship to protect video games under the First Amendment, some media scholars subsequently criticized the ruling for equating video games with film. To media scholar Jennifer Petersen, for instance, the court crucially failed to recognize that, "unlike…film, [video] games are built of code and computer files, complexes of software and hardware." Petersen's accusation that the Court's principle error was the Justice's "exclusive focus on the screen," is characteristic of a recent a resurgence among scholars focusing on the materiality of media objects.

Specifically, German media scholars like Freidrich Kittler, Wolfgang Ernst have supplied the critical theory for a neo-materialist movement that brings with it a vociferous return of distinctions between media—especially between a digital, computational forms like video games and an

expressive photographic medium like film. However, a close reading of the case demonstrates how the Justices' opinions—and the circumstances that led them to those opinions—provide a crucial critique to materialist conceptions of video games and media specificity for failing to recognize the relationship between materiality and experience.

In Chapter 2, I turn my attention to a shift that began the following year with the Museum of Modern Art's foray into video game collection in 2012. While MoMA's collection in some ways echoes founding of MoMA's Film Library and its subsequent Department of Film in 1935—a momentous turn for the role of film in museum practice and academia—the video games it acquired were specifically labeled "design objects" and categorized as "interactive design," connoting an institutional and theoretical divide from the seemingly less functional "art" objects in other departments. Part of what this decision forces us to reckon with is the fact that Manovich's argument about the myth of interactivity has clearly not been applied here. Consequently, it is essential to reckon with the fact that interactivity remains a pervasive and critical term for articulating something both novel and noteworthy characteristics of the encounter between humans and video games. This chapter proposes that the entire debate over interactivity as a unique characteristic of video games is missing a critical distinction between aesthetic objects and design objects—the former of which is engaged textually, and the latter of which is engaged functionally. To make this case, the chapter transitions into a close reading of the computer game *The Stanley Parable* (Davey Wreden, 2013), which reveals how video games present a privileged site for examining the relationship between aesthetics and design because they can explicitly invite textual and functional experiences simultaneously. Using this reading I make the case that interactivity is not just a description of the material construction of the artifact in question or its media; it is a critical position one takes in apprehending a cultural object.

Chapter 3 turns its attention to the lessons we can derive from the correspondence between ludic and aesthetic experiences when it comes to film and video games. I make the case that video games can help us understand cinematic reception in terms of entering a play-space which, in narrative films, involves encountering a built world. The reverberation between *gameplay* and narrative film spectatorship provides outlets for thinking about film reception in terms of how video game worlds are explored and apprehended. To investigate and illustrate this idea, this chapter looks closely at Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998), which is a remarkable film for demonstrating how video game play can relate to film reception because the film has a rather unusual way of positioning its spectator in relation to the fictional world it creates. Specifically, the film's multiple diegetic layers allow the spectator to remain both in a reflexive position outside one layer of the film, while remaining effectively absorbed inside another layer of the film. This produces a mode of engagement that feels particularly resonant with the way video game players can both *play in* and *play with* video game worlds.

Chapter 4 continues the theme of world-building to examine one of the principal challenges in creating critical parity between video games and film—their differing ontological (or "indexical") relation to the historical world. The assumption is that while films have the capacity to *document* the historical world, video games always *construct a* world (akin to animation or other non-indexical forms). Specifically, I look at the video game *LA Noire* in relation to a peculiar cycle of mid-century American films (sometimes referred to as "semi-documentary noirs") as an occasion to interrogate the relationship between "real-world" historic cities and their counterpart versions experienced through video games and films. Through an analysis of these texts, I demonstrate that the notion of authenticity that we associate with the documentary can be manufactured in video games through the experience of complex, contingent systems. This leads me to make the case that video games can have documentary functions akin to those produced by films.

Taken together, these chapters reconsider and recalibrate some of the central notions undergirding the way both scholars and enthusiasts apprehend video games. My methodological approach, which adapts a film studies discourse to better understand and incorporate video games, not only reveals overlooked parallels between the receptive experiences of film and video games, but also complicates some of the basic distinctions we make in characterizing these forms.

CHAPTER 1

Video Game Materiality:
The Supreme Court and the Case Against
Medium Specificity

1.1   DIFFERING OPINIONS

In the introduction, we discussed a few of the ways to situate video games as a medium in relation to other media. Specifically, in the word *play* we found that video games might be contextualized in relation to a ludic context of *games* and *gameplay*, but we also recognized that another valence of *play* suggesting a connection forged in the articulation of media objects encoded with recorded expressions. Underlying either lineage, however, is a question about whether video games are distinct in way that justifies treating them as categorically different or new. That is to say, are video games distinguishable enough as a medium to justify apprehending them through an altogether different framework from either expressive media or games?

As it happened, in a legal sense this question was implied during the 2011 US Supreme Court case *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association* judging the constitutionality of California's attempt to regulate the sale of "violent" video games to minors, in which the Justices confronted the difficult task of situating video games as a medium. In the oral arguments, the Justices openly considered several preexisting frameworks based on video games' presumed relationship to more established media. During oral arguments Justice Kagan, for one, entertained the idea that video games should be understood as the "modern-day equivalent[s] of *Monopoly* sets." Video games, Kagan explained, "are things that people use to compete… [just as *Pong* is] playing tennis on your TV." Yet, Kagan also wondered aloud if the Court had an interest in "separat[ing] video games into *narrative* video

games and *non-narrative* video games." Meanwhile, Justice Ginsburg challenged the law's proponents to articulate the characteristics of video games that justify regulating them differently from other expressive media including films, comic books, and fairy tales, with a simple question, "why are video games so special?"[1]

As it turned out, a divided court, with some atypical ideological configurations, ended up striking down California's attempt to regulate video games largely on the grounds that video games are not "special" enough to warrant being treated differently from those forms of expression already protected under the law including film, literature, and comic books. On the contrary, writing for the Court the late Justice Scalia's majority opinion downright rejected California's argument that video games present "special problems" because they are uniquely "interactive." Instead Scalia argued that "the California Act [was] the latest in a long series of failed attempts to censor violent entertainment…[and b]efore videogames came cheap novels depicting crime, …, motion pictures, comic books, television and music lyrics…"[2]

Still, the Court's decision was far from unanimous, and, frankly, the 7 to 2 decision on record obscures the significant disagreements among the Justices over central questions about how to understand video games. For one thing, only the minimum five Justices signed on to Scalia's majority opinion; Justices Alito and Roberts, explicitly did not join Scalia's opinion and instead struck down California's regulation on narrower grounds concerning the law's vagueness.[3] Meanwhile, Justices Breyer and Thomas dissented in separate opinions. Perhaps more telling is that Kagan, one of the five Justices that provided Scalia with enough votes to maintain the majority opinion, has since described this case as the "toughest" decision she has had to make since joining

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[1] The official transcript for the oral arguments from *Brown V. Ema*, 39,5. Case# 08-1448 The case was originally known as *Schwarzenegger V. Entertainment Merchants Ass'n.*

[2] Scalia Opinion Announcement - June 27, 2011, ibid., 2737.

[3] Alito and Roberts do not exclude the possibility that video games are a form of an expression that can be regulated. However, in their judgments, the statute at issue in *Brown* lacked the specificity to distinguish between acceptable and non-acceptable video games.

the Court, explaining that it is "the one case where...I just don't know if [my decision was] right."[4]

Even the majority opinion, which is delivered in Scalia's typically assured rhetorical bravado, relies

on rather slippery logic; it at once argues that a video game player's "interaction with the virtual

world" is a "distinctive feature to the medium [of video games]," while also making the case that

"interaction" is found in other expressive media and should then only be understood as different as

a "matter of *degree* [rather] than of *kind.*"[5] In other words, it would seem that Scalia at once

acknowledges the quality of "interaction" as a meaningful and distinguishing feature of video games,

and yet he also argues that video games provide only an amplified gradient of what occurs when, say,

a novel "draws the reader into the story."[6]

Among those Justices who did not sign on to Scalia's opinion, we find arguments outlining

why video games are "special" enough as a medium to be treated differently under the law. Breyer

proposes the idea that, unlike books or movies, "video games combine physical action with

expression." As an "active" medium, Breyer argues, video games are instructive (akin to "target

practice") and "can cause more harm…than can typically passive media, such as books or films or

television programs."[7] Breyer's logic is that, since the government can regulate physical action, the

government may also be able to regulate video games. Taking it further, for Alito—and the co-

signing Chief Justice Roberts—video games "may be very different from anything that we have seen

before." Alito returns to the notion of "interactivity" and reasons that video games potentially

provide an "unprecedented ability to participate" compared to other media. In this respect, Alito

specifically questions Scalia's fundamental assumption that video game interaction is only different

in "degree" rather than "kind":

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[4] Elana Kagan, interview by Christopher Eisgruber, November 20, 2014, 2014.
[5] My Italics *Brown V. Ema*, 2733,38.
[6] Ibid., 2738. Scalia description is actually a quote from Judge Posner's circuit decision in separate case regarding violent video games. *American Amusement Machine Ass'n V. Kendrick*, 244 F. 3d 572, 577 (2001).
[7] *Brown V. Ema*, 2765,68.

> *Spending hour upon hour controlling the actions of a character who guns down scores of innocent victims is not different in 'kind' from reading a description of violence in a work of literature…[Scalia's majority opinion] is sure of this; I am not. There are reasons to suspect that the experience of playing violent video games just might be very different from reading a book, listening to the radio, or watching a movie or a television show.[8]*

Those "reasons to suspect" may have come in part from the dozens of social scientists cited within the case whose research links violent video games with aggressive behavior in adolescents.[9] In fact, many of those same social scientists later felt that the Court's decision firmly discounted the validity of their research.[10]

Still, for the popular press and the video game industry, the Court's decision was less of a rebuke of social science, than an affirmation of a constitutional declaration of the artistic legitimacy of video games, or as Seth Schiesel of the New York Times opened his article after the ruling "it is now the law of the United States that video games are art."[11] While an overstatement, at the very least the Court had placed video games alongside film and literature as a medium or definite form of expression that is assumed to maintain some "serious religious, political, scientific, educational, journalistic, historical, or artistic value."[12]

Part of what is so intriguing about the various opinions expressed in the case is how they reflect analogous ambivalence among media scholars about how—or maybe if—we should position video games as distinct medium.

For a long time in media studies, it was easy to ignore questions about what defines video games because "media specificity" had been declared woefully misguided by scholars like Noël

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[8] Ibid., 2748,42.

[9] In fact, in Breyers written opinion, he includes an appendix listing over a hundred studies "supporting the hypothesis that violent video games are harmful" ibid., 2772-78.

[10] C. J. Ferguson, "Violent Video Games and the Supreme Court: Lessons for the Scientific Community in the Wake of Brown V. Entertainment Merchants Association," *Am Psychol* 68, no. 2 (2013).

[11] Seth Schiesel, "The Court Has Ruled; Now Games Have a Duty," *New York Times*, Jun 28 2011. See also Catherine J. Ross, "A Video Victory for Free Speech," *The Washington Post*, June 28 2011; Will Fulton, "The Day Justice Scalia Helped Save Video Games," *Digital Trends*, February 15 2016.

[12] This threshold was established in *Miller V. California*, 413 US 15 (1973). It has been reaffirmed many times since.

Carroll. In what may have been a backlash against Marshall McLuhan's brand of media specificity,

Carroll argued that overemphasizing media distinctions lead to overly determinist frameworks, and

minimized the way these forms were practically experienced. In sum: it was "media essentialism"[13]

But Ian Bogost and Alexander Galloway have made notable attempts to define video games through

decisive characteristics like "procedural rhetoric" and "action," respectively. Bogost calls video

games an "expressive medium," and defines them as "rule-based representations and interactions

rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures." Video game expression, he

continues, is "tied to the core affordances of the computer: computers run processes, they execute

calculations and rule-based symbolic manipulations."[14] Galloway, meanwhile, begins his exploration

of video games with the proposition that "if photographs are images, and films are moving images,

then video games are actions." Accordingly, Galloway makes a clear "distinction between those art

forms that require the physical action of both the user and the work for the work to exist, and those

that do not." As pointed out in the introduction, Galloway's other guiding principle for

distinguishing video games from other expressive media is that "video games…are software systems

[and] this must always remain in the forefront of one's analysis."[15]

     More recently, the case for media specificity has gone even farther by specifically working

against a timeline that places video games alongside other expressive media. In addition to

McLuhan, German media scholars like Freidrich Kittler and Wolfgang Ernst have supplied the

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[13] Noel Carroll, for one, persuasively made the case against media specificity by arguing it is a myth that provides a determinist framework and minimizes the qualities that operate across media. See Noël Carroll, "The Specificity of Media in the Arts," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 19, no. 4 (1985); Noël Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[14] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games : The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

[15]Galloway, *Gaming Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, 128. Specifically, Galloway distinguishes the four moments of "gamic action" that are characterized by the "physical action of both the user and the work." These categories are drawn from two binaries that Galloway builds his ideas around, that of the operator/machine and that of the diegetic/nondiegetic. Ibid., 3,6. Bogost and Galloway both position video games within a cultural tradition of expressive media, before explaining how they are materially distinct. As in Scalia's invocation of a history of censoring entertainment, both Bogost and Galloway situate video games within a cultural lineage that includes expressive media like film, implicitly recognizing how video games inherit the tradition of media that can express ideas and represent our world back to us.

critical theory for what Ian Verstegen has characterized as "the rise of studies of digital materiality and a philosophical turn to materialism."[16] This neo-materialist movement brings with it a vociferous return of distinctions between media—especially between digital, computational forms like video games and an expressive photographic form like film. This neo-materialist approach to media studies argues that digital media, including video games, is not simply a successive milestone on a continuous timeline of culturally expressive media. Rather, digital media, including video games, provides a categorical divergence from that timeline—or what Thomas Elsaesser characterized as a distinct techno-logic "made up of switches and relays, of circuits and grids, … made possible by harnessing electricity and mastering electromagnetic fields, rather than by mechanical devices arranged in a particular spatio-temporal order." [17] The material gap between the optical image and the electronic image cannot simply be traversed through cultural narratives and, following the neo-materialist critics' reading of how to produce accounts of history, it is ideologically fraught to do so. Within this approach, the medium specificity of the digital is not simply a useful way of distinguishing some media; it denotes definite material distinctions, ones which are not easily glossed over with qualitative interpretive approaches utilizing concepts like "remediation" or "convergence." Instead of worrying about being labeled "media essentialists," these neo-materialists are now quick to accuse hermeneutic readings of video games as "screen essentialism."[18]

Before we allow the resurgence of materialist approaches to media to sever all ties between digital and non-digital media, it is helpful to return to Supreme Court's consideration of video games to illustrate how the Justices' opinions—and the circumstances that led them to those opinions—

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[16] Ian Verstegen, "Dispositional Realism and the Specificity of Digital Media," *Leonardo* 47, no. 2 (2014): 159.

[17] Thomas Elsaesser, "Media Archaeology as Symptom," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 14, no. 2 (2016): 195.

[18] The specific phrase "screen essentialism" seems to have been coined by Nick Montfort and popularized by Matthew Kirschenbaum. See Nick Montfort, "Continuous Paper: The Early Materiality and Workings of Electronic Literature," *Modern Language Association, Philadelphia, PA. URL: http://nickm. com/writing/essays/continuous_paper_mla. html [25 August 2015]* (2004).and Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms : New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008).

provide a helpful critique to overly materialist conceptions of video games. This allows us to carefully consider the practical and legal implications of the effort to define video games as a specific medium, and what happens when we distinguish video games from other expressive media on materialist terms.

This chapter begins, then, by recounting the historical context the Court used to justify their cultural approach to video games, followed by an account of the materialist criticism of the Court's approach. Looking closely at the materialist conception of video games, however, reveals that this approach can neglect the importance of utilizing cultural frameworks for understanding video games. The second part of this chapter examines some of the ways the Supreme Court assessed video games on a practical level. This analysis reveals the absence of crucial experiential components in discussions about medium-specificity and video games. Specifically, *Brown*'s details provide insights into why the term "interaction" remains a sorely misunderstood term in relation to video games. Additionally, details about how the Justices watched DVDs of gameplay recordings allow us to articulate the problem of theorizing video games without acknowledging the importance of theories of spectatorship. Together, this discussion will illustrate shortcomings of medium-specific conceptions of video games that are overly contingent on materiality.

1.1.1 Cultural Precedents and Material Dissent

When the issue of video game censorship came before the Supreme Court, the Court was well aware of the potential social, economic, and cultural consequences of delineating a new medium. Roughly a century earlier, 1915's *Mutual Film Corp v. Industrial Commission of Ohio* found the Justices similarly tasked with defining a new mass-entertainment medium in a case involving state censorship of motion pictures. As in *Brown*, the pro-censorship argument—which prevailed in *Mutual*—hinged on the idea that this new visual medium should be categorically distinguished from those media

protected by the First Amendment as forms of free expression. As the Court explained in its decision, motion pictures were not to be considered equivalent to media of "expression, whether by speech, writing or printing." Instead—lending additional credence to Tom Gunning's notion of the "cinema of attractions"—motion pictures were classified alongside "theatre, the circus, and all other shows and spectacles," which, while considered "mediums of thought," did not enjoy the same protections under the first amendment as "expression."[19]

Even amongst these other spectacle-driven media, motion pictures were singled out for their exceptional "capability and power" to morally corrupt audiences. As the Court explained:

> *[Motion pictures] are mere representations of events, of ideas and sentiments published and known, vivid, useful and entertaining no doubt, but, as we have said,* **capable of evil**, *having power for it, the greater because of their attractiveness and manner of exhibition.*[20]

This decision, outlining the cinema's medium-specific "capacity for evil"—as it was subsequently referred to—justified the next five decades of state-sanctioned film censorship. According to the scholarship of Laura Wittern-Keller, the 1915 ruling reflected the popular sentiment of the early 20th century that "movies were an entirely new medium—far more graphic, more widespread, and more rapid in delivering realistic, riveting instruction in the ways of romance, seduction, and crime."[21] In 2011's *Brown* there is a clear echo of *Mutual's* argument against film, as California tried to convince the Court that these were "offensively violent video games depicting brutal and sadistic acts" and that "the level of graphic detail and realism contained in many modern violent video games is without historical parallel."[22] On both occasions, the moral threat is enabled by increasing realism and graphic detail.

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[19] *Mutual Film Corp. V. Industrial Comm'n of Ohio*, 236 US 230, 243 (1915). Also see Laura Wittern-Keller, *Freedom of the Screen: Legal Challenges to State Film Censorship, 1915-1981* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 43.
[20] My formatting. *Mutual V. Ohio*, 243-44.
[21] Wittern-Keller, *Freedom*, 18.
[22] Petitioners' Brief *Brown V. Ema*, 43. Only Alito (and Roberts) seems swayed by this argument, however. See below.

By the mid-twentieth century, film's exceptionality was no longer a convincing argument to the Supreme Court (perhaps because, by that point in time, the Justices had lived most of their lives in a world with moving pictures). It took until 1952 for the Supreme Court to "bring films under the umbrella of the First Amendment." After a series of film censorship cases, in 1966 "the Supreme Court set down such rigid procedural requirements for governmental film censorship that all [but one] of the remaining states gave up. Beginning with the [1952] *Burstyn* decision and increasing with the [1966] *Freedman* decision, the mechanics of governmental film censorship grew to be such an onerous burden that, one by one, the states realized that it was no longer worth the effort." [23]

By the time of *Brown* in 2012*,* any sense of film's medium-specific exceptionality or legacy as spectacle was long gone, as movies were unceremoniously listed alongside protected forms of expression like literature, illustrations, and Grimm's fairy tales. *Mutual's* impact instead becomes one of a cautionary tale about medium-specificity, which is why Scalia's majority opinion in *Brown* cites *Mutual* and its eventual reversal as a historical lesson about avoiding kneejerk reactions to emerging media.[24] Indeed, during oral arguments, Scalia presented the legacy of film censorship to challenge California, describing how early film censors essentially used a parallel argument to California's: "[Those early censors said,] 'we've had violence in Grimm's fairy tales, but we've never had it live on the screen.' Every time there's a new technology, you can make [the] argument [that its depiction of violence is categorically different.]"[25] Video games, in this view, are simply the newest way to express ideas stemming from the latest technological innovation or cultural trend.

Yet, it is this historical timeline of cultural media, which places video games on a technological continuum with other forms of expression like film and literature, that digital media

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[23] Wittern-Keller, *Freedom*, 276-77. This means that films, like other forms of speech, can only be restricted under exceptional circumstances, like for instance, when it is deemed to directly incite violence and if they lack "serious religious, political, scientific, educational, journalistic, historical, or artistic value."

[24] *Brown V. Ema*, 2737.

[25] Ibid., 2741.

scholars interested in materiality have begun adamantly contesting as of late. In media and legal scholar Jennifer Petersen's view, the Court's decision profoundly mischaracterizes video games through a bias of "mimetic visual representation and narration," effectively placing video games in an erroneous historical timeline of expressive media. To Petersen, the Court "gloss[ed] over the actual social relations being protected" by failing to recognize that, "unlike books and film, [video] games are built of code and computer files, complexes of software and hardware." If the Court had comprehended video games "in the same category as computer code," Petersen reasons, then video games would be considered within a distinct media lineage, one that provides a more appropriate legal framework. Specifically, video games would be considered "speech plus," a legal category connoting a medium's crucial functional dimension—effectively *action*, in addition to *expression*. To justify this argument Petersen relies on the notion that video games "are, after all, the manifestation of machine and human action, the outcome of interactions between the code and the player."[26] In Petersen's estimation, recognizing video games as "speech plus" might not have changed the outcome of *Brown*, but it would have proved crucial to understanding video games along a different axis from other visual and narrative media, which would have allowed the Court to protect the actual social and technical questions at issue.[27] It is vital to recognize, however, that Petersen's condemnation of the Court's apparent "exclusive focus on the screen" is, at its core, premised on the principles of a particular materialist approach to digital media that should be contextualized.[28]

In emphasizing video games' underlying structure (i.e. its materiality) and downplaying the player's experience, Petersen echoes the criticism of what Nick Montfort, Matthew Kirschenbaum,

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[26] Jennifer Petersen, "Behind the Screen: Visuality, Law, and New Media," *Popular Communication* 12, no. 3 (2014): 176, 66-7. Petersen challenges the primary supposition that video games should be thought of as "pure speech, [and,] just like movies and books, [they] should receive the same free speech protections."
To make this argument Petersen cites both Bogost and Galloway. See also Jennifer Petersen, "Is Code Speech? Law and the Expressivity of Machine Language," *New Media & Society* (2013).
[27] Petersen, "Behind the Screen," 176.
[28] Ibid., 173.

and Jussi Parrika all condemn as "screen essentialism" [29]— a phrase that counters accusations of

"media essentialism" with retaliatory accusations of the superficiality of hermeneutic approaches to

video games (and other "new media"). Screen essentialism is cast as an approach focusing on

narrative and visuals, while neglecting the underlying material components of both the video game

as a physical object, and its respective platform. Put another way, the screen essentialist is said to

privilege the interface, reading it alone as the video game's text, without accounting for those

hidden, yet quantifiable operations that allow the interface to manifest. Kirschenbaum, in particular,

criticizes the "medial ideology" of the screen essentialist approaches that favors the user's

phenomenological experiences, while "many of the plain truths about the fundamental nature of

electronic writing [remain] apparently unknown at a simple factual level, or else overlooked or their

significance obscured." [30] We find a similar conviction in Petersen's critique of the Court's failure to

note the "actual" social and technological conditions of video games. [31]

   In this way, Petersen's reasonable argument only represents one side of a critical divergence

amongst media scholars about how to conceive of digital artifacts and software in relation to media

history, one which finds both sides accusing the other of "essentialism." As Jussi Parikka explains,

there are "two camps of media studies: the German variant of hardcore/hardware media

archaeology and the cultural studies Anglo-American style of [media archaeology] focusing on

content, users, and representations." [32] Petersen's criticism of the Court relies on elements of the

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[29] See also Thomas Apperley and Jussi Parikka, "Platform Studies' Epistemic Threshold," *Games and Culture* (2015).
[30] Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms*, 44-46.
[31] To be fair, Petersen's argument relies on a more materialist approach to video games as a means to an end. Her point is effectively that the court's conception of video games protected the corporate speech of video game producers while discounting "political and expressive freedoms of citizens." Petersen, "Behind the Screen," 176.
[32] This divide media archeology broken down into the "media materialist" camp—characterized by the work of figures like Friedrich Kittler and Ernst—and the "contextual" camp—characterized by scholarship from scholars including Tom Gunning and Anne Friedberg. Jussi Parikka, "Archives in Media Theory: Material Media Archaeology and Digital Humanities," in *Understanding Digital Humanities*, ed. David M. Berry (New York;Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire;: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 87-88. Elsewhere Parikka refers to "a binary division…between the socially and culturally oriented Anglo-American studies and the techno-hardware approach of German scholars, who have taken their cue

"hardcore," "media materialist" approach, which understands digital artifacts in terms of their literal, material operations, while the Court's opinion apparently falls into a more contextual, "cultural" approach to digital artifacts. While it may not be immediately apparent why these camps are mutually exclusive, Thomas Elsaesser has recently pointed out that the debate's "stakes are significant" because the two sides provide vastly different ideological conceptions of media history.[33] As we shall soon see, these sides also have fundamentally distinct notions of the very constitution of the video game.

1.1.2 The Material Video Game

At the extreme ends of Parikka's cultural and material divide, not only do we find different notions of how to study video games, but we find drastically different notions of what constitutes the object of study itself. For a humanist, we might say that scholars fundamentally disagree about what comprises the video games' underlying textuality. For the culturalist, a text exists beyond the literal material object itself. This has been true, at least since the rise of postmodernism and poststructuralism, which moved cultural theory away from positivist conceptions of textuality or notions that a text can be delimited to, say, the intentionality of author, transhistorical signifiers, or its material composition. Instead, the text and textuality are understood, at least to some extent, as socially, historically, and politically constructed. The text of the video game, in a certain sense, has been apprehended through a notion of the video game as experienced. For the materialist, though,

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from Friedrich Kittler's synthesis of Foucault, information theory, media history, and McLuhan…" Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications* (Univ of California Press, 2011), 8.

[33] Thomas Elsaesser's recent work discusses the material/cultural divide in media archaeology in relation to film history. He asks "might it be possible if not to heal this rift, to nonetheless come to a better understanding of why and how it occurred? The stakes are significant: it would, on the one hand, help answer my question what is/was the cinema (good) for, and on the other, clarify how the cinema might clarify how the cinema might become, either despite, or because of its supposed obsolescence, the repository for that different kind of future that seems to lie at the heart of media archaeology's utopian aspirations." Elsaesser, "Media Archaeology as Symptom," 196.

the video game is an object that should be understood informatically, essentially as a code which provides a set of procedural protocols that produce a series of material operations in relation to a platform. This materialist approach advocates investigating video games principally in terms of their physical, mathematical, logical, technological, and functional structures, while a video game's narrative content and the player's experience is either beside the point or largely determined by the materiality. To the materialist, the video game's textuality is what is produced when one comprehensively maps how all these interrelated operations function. According to Parikka, this approach counters unrestrained screen essentialism with "a nonconsumer, and nonuser, approach to media [which is] also *beyond* history and is deeply invested in develop[ing]…new critical humanities techniques to study technologies and technocultures on their own terms."[34]

The materialist approach positions its conception of media as a significant departure from typical humanities approaches. Friedrich Kittler, who, along with Marshall McLuhan, provides the theoretical foundations for the materialist approach, articulated a conception of media and technological history apart from human and cultural history—a project that has been characterized as essentially excising the "human" from the humanities.[35] In doing so, the materialist approach fundamentally rejects conceptions of media history like the one used by Scalia in *Brown*, which views media on an ostensibly evolutionary, cultural timeline. For materialists, anatomizing digital artifacts such as video games, provides occasions to counter the teleology of cultural narratives, by allowing scholars to uncover the obscured counter-histories lying dormant within the structural design of the material object. Wolfgang Ernst, who perhaps represents the extreme end of the materialist camp, explains the distinction between material and cultural approaches in the following manner:

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[34] Apperley and Parikka, "Platform Studies," 14,2.
[35] Friedrich Adolf Kittler, *Austreibung Des Geistes Aus Den Geisteswissenschaften: Programe Des Poststrukturalismus*, vol. 1054 (Schöningh, 1980).

As opposed to multimedia aesthetics, digital archaeology tries to get beyond sight and sound because, behind the images and noises, we are confronted with practices in which visual images no longer have any reference to an observer in a 'real; optically perceived world;' but rather refer to electronic mathematical data in which abstract visual and linguistic elements coincide and are circulated.[36]

For Ernst, aesthetic categories are wholly irrelevant. The sensorial descriptions of "sight" and "sound" already connote an adulterating context of human perception. Parikka explains that the materialist camp's objective, typified by Ernst, seeks not to interpret an object's meaning per se, but to understand the object through a process of diagramming its operations and structure. Objects are understood "in their material processuality—the logical and material infrastructure which are media technological only if they work…[T]he task of the media archaeologist becom[es] less a textual interpreter and a historian, and more an engineer and specialist in wiring and diagrammatics of circuits."[37] The archaeologist records and presents the materiality without explicating the materiality or the content in terms of representation or metaphor.

The most influential version of this approach is probably Matthew Kirschenbaum's materialist analysis of the early PC video game *Mystery House* (Roberta and Ken Williams, 1980) which models a way to critically engage software by focusing on the underlying traces passively recorded in the digital object's engineering and code.[38] Put another way, Kirschenbaum performs a reading of the "disk image," instead of interpreting *Mystery House* by analyzing the game's interactive storyline or the graphical output displayed on a screen which would be more familiar approaches within literature and film scholarship. It is this "disk image" in concert with the computer's ability to process that image, that comprises the digital object itself to Kirshenbaum, who explains his approach to *Mystery House* as a new standard for critically reading digital objects:

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[36] Wolfgang Ernst, *Electronic Mediations : Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis, US: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2012), 126.

[37] Parikka, "Archives," 95-96.

[38] Parikka makes the point a few times that Kirschenbaum's work is an "'exemplary' illustration of a media archaeological approach to software. See Apperley and Parikka, "Platform Studies," 3. and Parikka, "Archives."(2012)

[T]o read through this one particular disk image, cultivating a thick textuality as a potential model of critical practice; a model encompassing both screen-level text and machine-level instructions, embracing both normal interaction with the game and activities closer to hacking or cracking…[39]

Kirschenbaum is compiling what he calls the "forensic materiality" of *Mystery House* and his idea of the "textuality" is quite literal. It includes everything that can be gleaned from the record held within the "disk image," which, he explains, "is not simply a copy of all of the files that were once on that original diskette; rather the disk image, like the facsimile or photograph suggested by the term, preserves all of the information that was recorded on the disk in its original storage geometry."[40] Kirschenbaum's forensic reading of the disk image produces a technologically determined "text," one emanating from the material constraints and practicalities as various media function together to produce the very literal material artifact we know as the game *Mystery House.*

Both the utility and the shortcomings of this approach seem most apparent when we try and apply an analogous approach to other, more traditional forms of expressive media. The equivalent of determining the forensic materiality for a novel would be to include everything from the books pagination, the clarity of the ink, the choice of font, the feeling of the paper stock, the sternness of the binding, and the idiosyncrasies and limitations of the actual printing press used to produce the novel. Because the disk image bares the mark left by the "hand" of their users, Kirschenbaum compares the disk image to the "palimpsest, or so called dirty books laced with marginalia and marks from the readers who have previously owned them, beloved by some collectors…and pored over by historians of reading and writing." [41] The content of the book—what it means or expresses—becomes almost irrelevant. In contrast, this material approach takes one a more

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[39] Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms*, 115.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid., 127.

teleological orientation in mapping out the entire historical record, an orientation perhaps already

implied in the scientific association with "forensics."

However, one of the most baffling consequences of when this overly materiality approach is

applied to video games, is that it neglects to explain how or why "video games" constitute a

meaningful category of software to be interested in to begin with. The logic that renders video

games into material objects, also flattens them ontologically, reducing them to the same bits, data

operations, and informatic protocols as all other software. *Mystery House* is not all that different from

a database software or an old copy of Microsoft Excel. The problem with this equation is that, as we

will discuss more in the next chapter, video games may operate as computer programs, but they also

lack the well-defined use-value of other software. Even if a video game's code is read teleologically

so that each part is identified as purposeful in the operation of the whole, the larger purpose of the

whole—the ends of that teleology—remain indeterminate. It is, then, only when one considers video

games' social uses and meta-functions—their cultural, economic, developmental, and, as we will

discuss in Chapter 2, *aesthetic* functions—that they are easily distinguishable from other software.

This recognition, however, places video games within a framework akin to how most scholars

approach film and literature as expressive media, understood to be cultural forms which exist to be

experienced, beheld, consumed and interpreted.[42]

While not every attempt to distinguish video games as medium requires a "hardcore

materialist" approach, what we find is that every attempt to define video games as a specific medium

relies on something of a material justification. In *Brown*, though, arguments about the video game

experience being distinct from other expressive media are always implicitly about medium

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[42] When something materially identical to video game is provided a definitive social function other than as an expressive work, like a test-pilot simulators or video games to teach math, it is comprehended differently. We might compare these video games to film, art, and literature considered in terms of advertising, propaganda, or instruction. For more on video games used within pedagogy see Marina Papastergiou, "Exploring the Potential of Computer and Video Games for Health and Physical Education: A Literature Review," *Computers & Education* 53, no. 3 (2009).

specificity. The problem is that for those attempting to privilege materiality above all else, "screen essentialism" provides an emblematic straw-man—a reductionist portrayal of how textual analysis and media studies is conducted within traditional humanities discourses. Those digital materialists condemning screen essentialism might imagine literary and film scholars as naively transposing conceptual frameworks onto software with little regard to the unique characteristics and technological limitations imposed by computational material assemblages. While culturalist approaches to video games may be weary of a deterministic relationship between materiality and textuality, there are also a host of cultural frameworks operating under the supposition that the underlying material construction of a text is inseparable from understanding how it is experienced.[43] Any comprehensive interpretive reading of a video game has a more robust notion of form than the neo-materialists give them credit for.

For the culturalist, though, the materiality needs to be understood primarily in terms of how it will be experienced. In relation to video games, then, one can still acknowledge Petersen's argument without resorting to denying video games' relationship to a history of culturally expressive visual forms. In fact, contrary to Petersen's critique, the opinions expressed within *Brown* were by no means ignoring video games' material properties. However, in the way the Justices approached the games, materiality was more implicitly recognized in how it potentially affected the experience video games provide.

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[43]For instance, within film studies, theories of spectatorship and the apparatus, in particular, present the spectator's experience as one constructed by the formal and material apparatus. For more on this see Michele Aaron, *Spectatorship : The Power of Looking On* (London; New York: Wallflower, 2007).

1.2   JUDGING INTERACTIVITY

1.2.1 Affective and Material Dimensions of Interactivity

California's argument for supporting their right to censor video games included the difficult task of rationalizing why video game violence warranted government regulation, where presumably first-amendment protected forms of expression like films, cartoons, and books, did not.[44] During oral arguments, California was cornered on this precise issue. Ginsburg first asked why California was not trying to regulate "all deviant, violent material in whatever form." Soon other Justices started in on this line of questioning. Roberts asked, "Why just video games? Why not movies, for example, as well?" Sotomayor inquired: "One of the studies…, says that the effect of violence is the same for a Bugs Bunny episode as it is for a violent video [game]. So, can the legislature now…outlaw Bugs Bunny?"

California's response was that video games' distinctiveness lies in "the interactive nature of violent video games—where the minor or the young adult is the aggressor, is the individual acting out this obscene level of violence, if you will—is especially harmful to minors." It is in California's brief, however, where the state really attempts to illustrate this understanding through a description of *Postal 2*:

> *The game involves shooting both armed opponents, such as police officers, and unarmed people, such as schoolgirls. Girls attacked with a shovel will beg for mercy; the player can be merciless and decapitate them. People shot in the leg will fall down and crawl; the player can then pour gasoline over them, set them on fire, and urinate on them. The player's character makes sardonic comments during all this; for example, urinating on someone elicits the comment "Now the flowers will grow."[45]*

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[44] Transcript of Oral Argument *Brown V. Ema*, 5-7.
[45] California is actually quoting the district court's description from a prior ruling. Petitioners' Brief ibid., 3. The lurid description is perhaps intended to support the component of California's argument for including violence within the unprotected category of "obscenity." This seems to have at least swayed Justice Alito whose description echoed the one found in California's Brief. "Victims are dismembered, decapitated, disemboweled, set on fire, and

This quote is particularly instructive in how it differs from a comparable description of, say, a film. In particular, there are several subjective positions being presented within this short description. It begins with the passive phrasing of what the "game involves," implying a kind of preexisting situation, not unlike how a film's plot could "involve" certain circumstances. Soon, however, it talks of "the player" performing the actions of "decapitating" and "urinating." Later there is also the distinct notion of the "player's character," who is seemingly an autonomous agent, who is nonetheless possessed by the player. This possession, along with the notion that the "player *can*" choose to do certain actions, particularly signals what separates video games from a film or cartoon. Whereas the film's protagonist belongs to the film, the player's character belongs to the player; ostensibly video games are distinct precisely because the player *can* choose to directly affect certain actions in the diegetic world. The film's spectator is assumed to have no comparable choice or power. The implication is, then, that video games are distinct because the receptive experiences they offer provide a kind of identification, complicity, or participation that is not found in the expressions of other media.

In theory, the respondents had a legal interest in downplaying distinctions between video games and other media because video games' protections relied on their commonality with protected forms like films or novels—a tactic some supportive amicus briefs took.[46] However, somewhat surprisingly, the respondents' brief—arguing that California's law was unconstitutional because

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chopped into little pieces. They cry out in agony and beg for mercy. Blood gushes, splatters, and pools. Severed body parts and gobs of human remains are graphically shown. In some games, points are awarded based, not only on the number of victims killed, but on the killing technique employed." Ibid., 2749.

[46] For instance, amicus brief making this argument argues that "there is nothing exceptional about the interactivity of video games that distinguishes them from other forms of expressive media, or that justifies content-based regulation of speech. Being able to interact with media content is not novel, as theater audiences well know. As technology progresses, so do the interactive features of all forms of media, such as, for example, e-books and movies on DVDs." Brief of Amici Curiae Entertainment Consumers Association, et al. Ibid., 6.

video games should be protected by the First Amendment—also emphasized what makes video games distinct:

> *Video games are a modern form of artistic expression. A video game is an interactive software program that a player experiences on a screen, such as a television or computer monitor. Like films, video games incorporate dialogue, music, visual images, plot, and character development. […] Unlike the viewer of a film or the reader of a book, the player of a video game has some control over the story…the player exercises some control over the choices made by the protagonist and the subsequent story development when confronted with various challenges. […] In this respect, playing a video game is like improvising a performance of a musical score, because the player engages in and contributes to the expressive activity rather than passively consuming it.[47]*

In this quote, the respondents are trying to have it both ways. They emphasize what video games share with film, literature, and music, in what may be an attempt to borrow the artistic credibility (and the accompanying protections) of other expressive media, but for some reason they also take great pains to explain what makes video games different. For California, player agency justifies censoring video games by exposing the unique dangers the medium poses; however the respondents' gambit argues that player agency actually affords video games additional First Amendment protections. Not only is the game protected as an expression, but the act of *playing* is protected as well: "the interactive aspect of video games heightens the First Amendment values at stake, because playing a game involves expressive activity not only by the game creators but by the player as well."[48] In other words, video games' unique materiality provides players with the agency to produce a secondary, posterior creative expression through the act of playing the game.

   In spite of being on opposing sides, then, the plaintiffs and the respondents achieved a rather unexpected consensus in their agreed assertion that "interactivity" is video games'

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[47] Respondents' Brief ibid., 2-3. This idea recalls the notion of the notion of play as performance discussed in the introduction. We will return to this point later in the chapter.

[48] Respondents' Brief ibid., 18. Here the respondents' argument critically suppresses any notion of video game playing as a form of *gameplay* and, instead—without acknowledging the provenance—they emphasize the valence of play that corresponds with performance and "playing a musical instrument." This could be understood as a dangerous argument if one recognizes that conduct can be regulated. It also assumes that video games are distinct and that a beholder's interpretation of other art objects would not be considered a protected form of expression.

distinguishing quality. All the more remarkable, however, was that Scalia's majority opinion largely rejected this idea regarding interactivity. As already stated, in Scalia's view the level of interactivity found in video games is different in "a matter of degree rather than of kind" and, accordingly, Scalia's appears to ally the Court with Lev Manovich, arguing that art and literature had already been "interactive" long before computational media and that new media's exclusive claim over interaction is a "myth."[49] Even though we will take a deeper dive into the term "interactivity" in the next chapter, it is worth briefly explaining how Scalia's opinion actually provides a more nuanced look at interactivity than even Manovich's own.

Scalia identifies two separate components of interactivity in California's argument: the first is the player's "control over the outcome," or what essentially amounts to agency over the form itself; the second, is the player's feeling of "participation." First, Scalia addresses the player's ability to "determine [a video game's] outcome." This component, what we might also call *narrative agency*, is something he argues is not distinctive to video games. As Scalia explains, "since at least the publication of *The Adventures of You: Sugarcane Island* in 1969, young readers of choose-your-own-adventure stories have been able to make decisions that determine the plot by following instructions about which page to turn to."[50] The video game player, like the choose-your-own-adventure novel reader, seemingly collaborates in the production of the story. The other component of interactivity Scalia identifies is a more *affective participation*, in which "the player participates in the violent action." Scalia rejects this quality as unique to video games because a book's reader is already able to "identify with the characters, …judge them and quarrel with them, …experience their joys and sufferings as the reader's own."

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[49] Manovich, *Language*, 66-71. This point was discussed in the introduction.
[50] *Brown V. Ema*, 2738. As we will see in the next chapter, this point is reminiscent of figures like Epsen Aarseth and Nick Montfort among others who focus on video games' association with "interactive fiction." See Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext : Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 89.

From the perspective of the neo-materialists and Petersen, Scalia's breakdown of interaction might invite accusations of screen-essentialism because it seems to primarily focus on the player's experience. (For the neo-materialist, interaction would be something found in the computational and algorithmic logic of the video game itself.) What an accusation of screen-essentialism here would fail to recognize, however, is that Scalia's breakdown of interactivity actually considers media materiality precisely by considering how that materiality is experienced. Specifically, Scalia's notion of *narrative agency* stems from a consideration of the structure of the text itself. In the material approach to video games, however, interactivity is contingent on the notion that video game players go beyond what Manovich called "psychological participation" with their effective agency over the literal composition of the text. This notion of material interactivity hinges on a tangible quantifiable action that translates into agency; only a variable and responsive physical materiality can provide this form of interactivity. By linking video games to choose-your-own-adventure novels, Scalia is making the point that the materially variable structure that leads to a feeling of narrative agency is found in other aesthetic objects protected by free speech. As we will see in the next chapter, Scalia's consideration and acknowledgement of both the affective and material connotations of interactivity is something that remains absent in the majority of scholarly conversations regarding video game interaction.

It is also important to remember, however, that not all of the Justices found Scalia's take on interactivity persuasive. Alito, in particular, found it highly problematic to "jump to the conclusion that a new technology is fundamentally the same as some older thing with which we are familiar."[51] Alito later described the exceptionality of playing a video game as a receptive experience by contrasting it with the act of reading: "only an extraordinarily imaginative reader who reads a description of a killing in a literary work will experience that event as vividly as he might if he played

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[51] *Brown V. Ema*, 2742.

the role of the killer in a video game."[52] Alito's assumption is that video games realize an affective

experience that in prior media might only have taken place in the minds of particular beholders. In

making his argument for video games' exceptionality Alito seemingly agrees with California's

argument that "detail and realism" in video games "is without historical parallel" when he explains

how "today's most advanced video games create realistic alternative worlds…[and] feature visual

imagery and sounds that are strikingly realistic…"[53]

In Alito's vivid descriptions, the material and affective dimensions of interactivity are

inextricable from one another:

> *Compare [a reader of a violent novel] with a video-game player who creates an avatar that*
> *bears his own image…who is forced to decide whether or not to kill the victim and decides to*
> *do so; who then pretends to grasp an axe, to raise it above the head of the victim, and then to*
> *bring it down; who hears the thud of the axe hitting her head and her cry of pain; who sees*
> *her split skull and feels the sensation of blood on his face and hands. For most people, the*
> *two experiences will not be the same.*

Alito presents a notion that the additional agency afforded by the new technology is inseparable

from the participatory experience. The physical perceptions Alito describes are seemingly afforded

by the distinctive material qualities of video games. In this description, the sense of participation in

the fictional world is not only imagined, but it is actualized to the degree that video games provide

the ability to render these scenes. The experiential participation is a direct function of the new

media's new technological affordances. The distinct material structure underlying video games

determines an experience that is categorically different "from anything we have ever seen before."

Perhaps the most telling detail of Alito's description, however, is that it seems to be engaging

with a hypothetical version of a video game. Hearing a "cry of pain" and seeing a "split skull" are

things that a video game could provide, but Alito describes how the player "feels sensation of blood

on his face and hands." This feeling is, then, Alito's own projection onto the video game, since no

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[52] Ibid., 2750.
[53] Ibid., 2748. Quote from California can be found here Petitioners' Brief ibid., 43.

video game-related technology provides this sensation (as of yet). Consequently, Alito's affective experience is less concretely rooted in the literal material affordances of video game form, and more reflective of his imaginative perception of what the experience entails. By no means is this latter characterization irrelevant to what video games are, but the fact is that Alito's imagined experience inadvertently supports Scalia's points that every new technology is initially conceived as overinflated with corruptive power and that interaction has always been an imaginary condition.

More importantly, though, the fact that Alito confused his imaginary experience of a video game with an empirical account illustrates the crucial point that the Justices may have had very little to no first-hand experience with video games to begin with, and this allows us to consider further how the Justices, on a practical level, familiarized themselves with video games.

1.2.2 Video Game Trials

In 1952, when the Supreme Court was deciding whether New York State could ban Roberto Rossellini's *Il Miracolo* (1951) for being "sacrilegious," for the first time ever the Justices actually viewed the film as part of their adjudicating process.[54] Since so much of the argument in the case revolved around the artistic merit of the film, the court found it necessary to experience the film first-hand. Wittern-Keller points out the prescience of Justice Reed's opinion in the case, when he made the point that the Court would now be obliged to determine the first amendment merits of films on a case-by-case basis, essentially "becom[ing] a board of supercensors."[55] And, indeed, after unanimously, but narrowly ruling that *Il Miracolo* could not be censored as "sacrilege," through the 1950s and early 60s, the Court soon faced several other film censorship cases that found them

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[54] See Wittern-Keller, *Freedom*, 138. The case regarding *Il Miracolo* is *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. V. Wilson*, 343 US 495 (1952).
[55] Wittern-Keller, *Freedom*, 141.

watching films such as Max Ophul's *La Ronde* (1950) and Marc Allégret's adaptation of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1955).[56]

The logic behind these screenings was ostensibly that the Justices needed to experience for themselves whether these films should be protected by the first amendment by watching them. However, by the late 1950s, there was a division amongst the Justices regarding their role as the "supreme critics"—some wanted to "articulate a clear statement of principle" and avoid having to judge each film individually, while others seemed content to continue judging the "cases on an individual basis."[57] Consequently, it was not until 1965 that the Court effectively shifted the burden of proof to the censors, by declaring films to be covered by first amendment by default. This point was essentially clarified (and scaled back) in a 1973 ruling argued that, for a film to be censored, it must be shown to lack a "serious religious, political, scientific, educational, journalistic, historical, or artistic value."[58]

When it came to video games in the *Brown* case, the Court presumably wanted to avoid a similar protracted process of judgment compared to the one that the cinema went through beginning some sixty years prior. After all, such a process would have essentially required the Justices to once again assume the role of "supreme critics," determining the artistic merits of individual video games. Before getting into the legal justification, it is worth recognizing practical complications that prevented the Justices from assuming such a role. The presumption is that playing video games requires a level of technical literacy and a basic skillset that the judges do not have. As Mark JP Wolf explains this point: "film viewers can watch a film from beginning to end

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[56] The case regarding *La Ronde* is *Superior Films, Inc. V. Department of Ed. Of Ohio*, 346 US 587 (1954).; the case regarding *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is *Kingley International Pictures V. Regents of the University of the State of New York*, US (1958).
[57] Wittern-Keller, *Freedom*, 212-13.
[58] *Freedman V. Maryland*, 380 US 51 (1965); *Miller V. California*.

and be satisfied that they have seen the film in its entirety, but a video game player must often have some amount of skill" merely to access the bulk of what could be called the content.[59]

Another relevant point to recognize is that *Brown* did not technically have a specific video game at its center. However, within the court briefs, California regularly referred to *Postal 2* (2003) as the prototypical example of a game that would be censored by their law, effectively allowing this game to serve as the litmus test for their argument. This appears to be the video game that Alito is describing, however, the only recorded account of any of the Justices having actually played the video game—or any game related to the case—comes from an anecdote relayed by Kagan: Breyer "had his clerk set up [*Postal 2*] in his office, […] I went over to his office, and there we were, killing everybody left and right."[60] Amusing as it may be to picture the then 73-year-old Breyer trying his hand at *Postal 2*—maybe even struggling to get his avatar to urinate on a corpse—it seems that playing at least one video game would be the minimum requirement for making an informed decision regarding video games and their relation to other media. In fact, what can be ascertained through the case's records is that the Justices' familiarity with video games in *Brown* came largely through second-hand modes of reception.

Aside from written descriptions of some video games contained within the plethora of briefs filed to the Court in an attempt to sway the Justices' opinions,[61] it seems that the Justices' exposure to video games was largely through DVDs and video tapes containing recorded footage from

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[59] Furthermore, "there are often courses of action and area of the game which are still left unexplored even after several times through." Wolf, *The Medium of the Video Game*, 13. Arguably a novel with an esoteric vocabulary could be described as requiring a comparable "skillset" to access its content. Although, in video games even a honed skillset may not guarantee access to content subject to some algorithmic probability.

[60] See Fred Barbash, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/09/18/how-and-why-justices-kagan-and-breyer-faced-off-in-a-violent-video-game-to-help-decide-a-major-case/?utm_term=.428937dd6d8c. The original interview is here Elana Kagan, interview by Martha Minow, Sept 14, 2015.

[61] Notably, amongst the amicus briefs supporting *Brown*'s respondents were some well-established video game industry publishers and developers of blockbuster games which were also infamously scrutinized to one degree or another for their carnage: Blizzard Entertainment developed *Diablo* (1996) and *World of Warcraft* [2004],); Id Software developed *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and *Doom* (1993); Microsoft produced *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Bungie, 2001) and *Gears of War* (*Epic Games,* 2006).

various video games voluntarily submitted as evidence by the opposing sides in the case. We may never know if Kennedy or Thomas actually sat down and watched either the five-minute "Video Game Violence Samplers" submitted by California or the "two-and-a half hours of excerpted game play" on video tapes submitted by the respondents, but the more instructive point arises simply when considering the significance of these videos' very existence.[62]

We can assume the DVDs and tapes were meant to provide the Justices with a sampling of recorded footage of the audio and visual content that a player could potentially encounter when playing certain video games. California's five-minute montage of gory and violent imagery was aimed to support their claim that video games provide an unprecedented experience, one that can be harmful to children. The respondents, by contrast, submitted longer segments specifically to supply more context in "contrast to the five minutes" of non-sequential footage in California's DVD.[63] If the experience that video games' provide is at issue, to what extent can watching a recording of video gameplay footage provide that experience? Is watching a video game being played a categorically different experience from playing that same video game oneself? The answer to these questions are somewhat complicated and they return us to thinking about issues of cultural and material notions of medium-specificity.

One thing to realize is that, there are both legal and theoretical issues involved with defining the video game in terms of the experience it provides. If one can experience a video game without playing a game first-hand, California is confronted by a cascading set of questions about censoring video games. Should a ban on violent video games include a ban on videos of recorded game

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[62] Respondents' Brief *Brown V. Ema*, 3. Only California's DVD is listed in the "Proceedings and Order" which lists "copies of trial exhibit 'Video Game Violence Sampler' received from counsel for the petitioners." However, elsewhere there were references to the video recording of video game footage.

[63] Respondents' Brief ibid. The respondents' excerpts came from the six games also apparently submitted into the record: *Medal of Honor: Frontline* (Electronic Arts, 2002), *God of War* (SCE Santa Monica Studio, 2005). *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3* (Ubisoft, 2003), *Jade Empire* (Bioware, 2005), *Resident Evil IV* (Capcom, 2005), and *Full Spectrum Warrior* (Pandemic Studios, 2004).

footage? Does this imply that the unique harm of video games transcends the player and includes bystanders watching the game being played—whether in person, over a streaming service, or through a DVD? California never ended up having to address these questions because the case never got that far, but the premise of their argument might have fallen through on the basis of these questions alone.

Thinking about the recorded video gameplay in relation to materiality, meanwhile, provides its own terms of analysis. From a "hardcore materialist" approach, the *Brown* DVDs clearly cannot be equated with the video games themselves. The discs do not include remnants of the video games' files, nor could they be "played" as games on any video game platforms.[64] So even if one were to conduct a Kirschenbaum-esque "digital forensics" on the files found on these DVDs, the files stored therein would contain no traces of the original games' code or underlying structure. (What the forensics might reveal instead would be information regarding when and how the video files were recorded, perhaps what software was used to edit the clips together or what was used to convert the video file type to one that could be played on DVD player.) Moreover, the DVD player, in its decoding of the disc's information, remains indifferent to the data it processes into successive images appearing on a screen and audio data it relays through the speakers. Whether the images rendered come from the video game depicted in scenes from the feature film *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003), scenes from *Elephant* that are inspired by first person shooters, surveillance footage from the Columbine school shooting that inspired elephant, or from the video game *Doom* (1993) which was famously blamed for the shooting—the data on DVD is essentially ontologically indifferentiable until cognized.

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[64] Presuming they were formatted to be compatible with as many DVD players as possible, the DVDs would have been encoded with the standard "DVD-video" format—itself likely comprised of MPEG-2 code layer for the video, and PCM, MP2, or AC-3 code layer for the audio. Also, because most video game consoles in the last 15 years can decode and play DVD formats, the consoles might be able "play" the *Brown* DVDs as movies.

Another view—one less materially deterministic about precise exhibition conditions, but still attentive to the material production and subsequent experience of materiality—might argue that the *Brown* DVDs should be likened to digital animation—or maybe machinima instead of all film.[65] It might matter, that, like *Toy Story* (1995), a video recording of *God of War* gameplay makes no claims toward indexically capturing images of the world, even as it may rely on representations of visual signifiers or that refer back to the world. The *Brown* DVDs, in this view, merely remediate video games, converting them into digital animations or machinima. In this understanding, Petersen's criticism that the Court focused on the "relation between the screen and the user rather than on the engineering and social construction of code behind the screen" seems more justifiable if only because the Justices may never have been exposed to actual video games—only to remediated animations.

Petersen's argument, and the hardcore materialist perspective, effectively fosters a dichotomy between the interface and the code. The fundamental problem with such a view, however, is that it woefully discounts how the interface itself can express aspects of the underlying materiality of a form. Any thoughtful approach to "the screen and the user" would recognize how key elements of "the engineering and social construction of the code" are perceptible in the experience not only in the interface but perhaps even the representations of the image. The judges do not need to read the game's code to recognize how that code will be experienced. In this way, reading the *Brown* DVDs as digital animation feels inadequate because it neglects to recognize the context—how these moving images of gameplay are experienced, interpreted, and/or cognized by their audience.

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[65] This perhaps also relates to the lines between digital animation and Machinima, cinematic productions made using video game engines and software. For more on these discussions see Henry Lowood and Michael Nitsche, *The Machinima Reader* (MIT Press, 2011).

When Alito and Breyer describe video game play in terms of an unprecedented level of action, agency, and participation, they are not only describing what is depicted, but what is engineered into the game's variable possibilities. The Justices' knowledge of what video games *are*, in addition to what they *show*, is crucial to the ways they experience the *Brown* DVDs. What the Justices experience when they watch a gameplay video is something of a narrated recording of a contingent series of occurrences, not the plotting of a prescribed expression as in a CGI film like *Toy Story*. The knowledge that the video game's player makes choices that represent divergent (even if only momentarily divergent) compositional configurations is crucial to recognizing what makes watching a video game different from watching an animated feature. The images presented on screen as gameplay are part of a responsive and alterable composition, one that varies in part because of the actions of a subsequent player.

Whether or not it was intentional, the *Brown* DVDs participate in a much broader, more inclusive understanding of video games, one that provides reason to be skeptical of any overly materialist characterizations of video games. Bundled into the act of spectatorship of the video game recording is the knowledge that the event visualized is being performed by a player in relation to a scripted, procedural text. Even in the video on the recorded gameplay DVD, the viewer experiences not only what appears on the screen, but also the accompanying possibilities concerning what did not happen, or what could have happened. One observation to make here then, is that describing the video game in terms of active "playing," in a manner that implies something wholly distinct from watching—setting up a dichotomy between the operator and spectator—obfuscates the video game player's experience by generalizing the encounter and veiling the critical lineage that connects video games to prior forms of expression.

What we find in *Brown*, then, is that the Court's relative video game illiteracy provided a surprisingly inclusive recognition that video games do not have to be played to be experienced.

Take, for instance, the increasingly widespread second-hand reception of video games as millions of people now watch others "play" through gameplay videos on YouTube and the popular streaming website and application *Twitch* and the massively popular "Let's Play" videos on the internet, which often consist of edited gameplay accompanied by commentary and reaction shots.[66] This second-hand experience is clearly not about "playing" the game, but watching the game be "played."

As in popular sports, video games can be played by one and watched and enjoyed by those who do not have direct agency within the game. But perhaps this is only true for some video games. Watching someone play *Pacman* is perhaps akin to watching a golf game in that both games are categorized by competition, and spectating is about watching a demonstration of some sort of combination of skill, talent, and maybe chance. However, watching someone play a narrative driven game like *Mass Effect* (Bioware, 2007) might be about merely seeing what unfolds in the plot and thinking about the decisions being made. This seems very different from, say, watching sports.

Part of understanding video games in terms of their textual experiences, then, entails embracing a critical lineage of "spectatorship." Even as video game spectatorship cannot simply be equated with film spectatorship, it is also important not to entirely sever the video game experience from film spectatorship. Where media materialists might dismiss this entire approach as "screen essentialism," material determinism can foreclose plenty of its own historical threads.[67] In this view, not only are all video games bound and reduced to their platforms, hardware, and source code, but,

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[66] For the last several years, "Let's Play" videos provide the bulk of the content on dozens of the most subscribed to YouTube channels. As of January 2017, the most subscribed to channel on all of YouTube is the Let's Play video channel of PewDiePie http://www.youtube.com/user/PewDiePie. This channel, has over 52 million subscribers and his videos have acquired over 14 billion. He is reportedly compensated multiple millions of dollars a year for these videos. for more on this see Mike Rose, "Pay for Play: The Ethics of Paying for Youtuber Coverage," Gamasutra, http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/219671/Pay_for_Play_The_ethics_of_paying_for_YouTuber_coverage.php; Patrick Klepek, "Who Invented Let's Play Videos?," Kotaku, http://kotaku.com/who-invented-lets-play-videos-1702390484; Christopher Zoia, "This Guy Makes Millions Playing Video Games on Youtube," The Atlantic, http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/03/this-guy-makes-millions-playing-video-games-on-youtube/284402/; The Let's Play Archive, "The Let's Play Archive," http://lparchive.org/.
[67] Again, see Carroll, "The Specificity of Media in the Arts."

in the name of upholding medium specificity, critics can fail to recognize constructive experiential resonances with other media. Instead, video games' texts need to be carefully parsed to better understand the varying modes of experience they foster and the cultural traditions of which they are a part.

1.3   MEDIUM SPECIFICITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

In the short coda to *Raising the Beam*—a book that serves as a demonstrative model for "platform studies" using the *Atari 2600*—Bogost and Montfort make the case that there are "five levels of digital media, situated in [culture and] context": 1) "platform," the material hardware; 2) "code," the program's language system that instructs the hardware; 3) "form/function," a program's operations; 4) "interface," the program's appearance; 5) "reception/operation," the experience of the program.[68] Bogost and Montfort explain each through scholarly discourses and frameworks deemed applicable to each level—platform studies and systems architecture at the "platform" level; code studies and software engineering at the "code" level; narratology and ludology at the "form/function" level; "approaches from visual studies, film theory, and art history" at the "interface" level; reception studies at the "reception/operation" level; etc. What is essential to note in relation to the concerns of this chapter is, however, that these levels are consistent with a continuous spectrum ranging from material to cultural approaches to new media. Moreover, there is perhaps an implicit ideological hierarchy, one which links materialism with the authority of scientific empiricism, and undermines culture as part of a relativistic humanities discourse. The study of platforms, code, and material are charted out in substantive and demonstrable diagrams, while attention to interface and reception is relegated to relativistic and unverifiable interpretations. However, while Parrika positions the cultural

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[68] Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost, *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), 146-48.

and material camps of media archeology in opposition to one another, understanding how ideas from each camp can inform one another a provide a more constructive approach to media history.[69]

Bogost and Montfort's divisions assume an air of empiricism because of their material underpinnings, so the consequences of their categorization scheme might be overlooked. Instead of dividing territory and establishing a hierarchy of standing, hopefully we can recognize that the extreme positions of both ends of the material and cultural divide have their limitations. A culturalist approach may neglect those aspects of the video game form that stem from its computational material base. An overly materialist approach, on the other hand, may fail to recognize the vastly different functions of objects with the same material bases. This way materiality can still be important to video games criticism without being determinant, because the notion of how materiality informs the video game experience would be interpreted through a careful analysis of the text.

As stated earlier, when considering the medium specificity of video games, it is important to recognize that privileging the material conditions—and viewing the technological operations and source code as closer to empirical reality—has a tendency to obfuscate crucial experiential resonances that exist across media.[70] Recognizing these common experiences not only allows us to approach emerging forms like interactive films viewed over VR that cannot easily be classified as video games or film, but it also helps us recognize categories of games and play that are important for understanding our encounter with certain films (amongst other aesthetic encounters). Medium specificity concerning video games also has a tendency to disregard lessons that come out of film studies, forgetting, for instance, that apparatus theory provides one model for thinking about how

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[69] Elsaesser expresses a similar sentiment regarding the different cultural and material approaches to media history when he says "Might it be possible if not to heal this rift, to nonetheless come to a better understanding of why and how it occurred? Elsaesser, "Media Archaeology as Symptom," 196.

[70] For example, a test pilot simulator used to train pilots, may be identical to a comparable video game, but they function very differently. As does a video file containing footage of Rodney King and a video file of gameplay from *Grand Theft Auto V*.

materiality shapes experience. At the same time, noting the materiality of video games allows us to recognize the new formal, ontological, and affective positions that are not easily found in ideas of film spectatorship.

This is not to say that medium-specificity cannot be a useful concept for understanding video games. Like Jacques Derrida's notion of genre, the concept of medium is "able to play the role of order's principle: resemblance, analogy, identity and difference, taxonomic classification, organization and genealogical tree, order of reason, order of reasons, sense of sense, truth of truth, natural light and sense of history." However, like Derrida's notion of genre, any law that defines a specific medium would be "precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy."[71] Every schema of definite categorization is both edifying and obscuring. In the effort to define video games as a specific medium, we need to be wary of claims of technical precision, while making sure that they dos not come at the expense of recognizing media commonality.

1.3.1 Modes of (Game)Play

For theorists who study video games from a ludic perspective, it may be surprising to learn that aside from a stray remark or two during the oral arguments, the *Brown* case almost completely overlooks the conception that video games should be principally apprehended in terms of games and play. In fact, *Brown* gives almost no indication that "gaming" already has a robust legal framework as a broad category of activities that can be regulated under US and state law, and that it is regularly employed in legal statutes concerning gambling, competitive sports, contests, and outdoor recreation.[72] Additionally, only one of the nearly two dozen amicus briefs filed in *Brown*

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[71] Jacques Derrida and Avital Ronell, "The Law of Genre," *Critical inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 81,59.

[72] See for instance James H Frey, "Federal Involvement in Us Gaming Regulation," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 556, no. 1 (1998).

makes a comparison between playing video games and gambling. Writing in support of California's right to censor video games, it states that "playing video games no more constitutes free speech than…playing bingo and other forms of gambling." This logic assumes that playing video games, like gambling, should be considered "conduct," and should therefore legally be able to be regulated.[73]

The absence of the legal concept of "gaming" seems like even more of an oversight if we recognize how video game culture is already inextricable from a number of cultural pastime activities that can be regulated as gaming. For one thing, there are now pretty established professional competitive video game leagues complete with sponsors and broadcast deals that are well on their way to being regulated like any other sport. [74]Another point worth acknowledging is that for decades now casinos have been filled with "electronic gaming" slot-machines with digital touch-screen interfaces that increasingly resemble that interfaces of video games. Mobile video games, meanwhile, have likewise been coopting the "addictive design" qualities of constant reward found in casino machine.[75] Another point worth recognizing is that, historically, the development of arcade video games have always been associated with pinball and the Japanese phenomenon of pachinko, two other arcade staples, which have been regulated as gambling in the past or are still regulated as gambling.[76] All of this is to say that if video games were understood more in line with a legal lineage

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[73] Written in support of California's right to regulate selling and playing games, the Eagle Forum Education & Legal Defense Fund argues that "conduct is not free speech, and selling or playing video games no more constitutes free speech than selling or playing bingo and other forms of gambling. Playing a video game is conduct rather than constitutionally protected free speech." Brief of Amicus Curiae Eagle Forum Education & Legal Defense Fund in Support of Petitioners*Brown V. Ema*, 4.

[74] TL Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming* (Mit Press, 2012).

[75] Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (Princeton University Press, 2012), 155.Mark Griffiths, who has been railing about the detrimental developmental effects video games for 20 years, has made a version of this point. Mark D Griffiths, Daniel L King, and Paul H Delfabbro, "The Technological Convergence of Gambling and Gaming Practices," *The Wiley-Blackwell handbook of disordered gambling* (2014).

[76] While most modern Japanese Pachinko machines would still be considered gambling in the US, when it came to pinball, it was eventually demonstrated that because a certain amount of skill was involved in achieving free balls or free games, playing it was not simply a matter of luck. Steven Kent, "Ultimate History of Video Games : From Pong to Pokemon and Beyond ... The Story Behind the Craze That Touched Our Li Ves and Changed the World," (2010).

of "gaming," the Court would have had a sound legal justification for regulating how video games are designed and played. What we find, instead, is that the Supreme Court, like so many other cultural institutions, neglects to make basic distinctions between distinctive modes of engagement and *gameplay* found within video games

Although there have been several subsequent scholarly attempts to think through categories of games and (*game*)*play*, Roger Caillois theories developed in *Man, Play, and Games* (1958) remain particularly productive for understanding how the different lineages of video games can exist simultaneously. Caillois identifies and describes four central modes of playful engagement, or playful modes of experience, only some of which are also clearly relevant to aesthetic experiences across media. The first category, *agôn* or "competition," is associated with contests between individuals/teams or games that are measured through quantitative scoring. The second category, *alea* or "chance," relates more than anything else to gambling because it is about playing the odds and a definitive lack of skill. The third category *mimicry* or "simulation" is a more abstract mode of play that may be understood in terms of games of make-believe, storytelling, and the suspension of disbelief. The fourth, *ilinx* or "vertigo" concerns activities related to achieving affective thrills or bodily sensations. Further Caillois explains how each of these modes of experience can be engaged within a spectrum of activities ranging from uncontrolled and disorderly on one end, to more regulated and organized on the other.[77] In Caillois' conception, these modes of (game)play can operate simultaneously, but many times one mode is principally dominant.

When thinking about video games' and their relationship to film—among other expressive aesthetic media—Caillois helps articulate enormously productive distinction between, on the one

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[77] For a more in-depth discussion see the chapter "The Classification of Games" Roger Caillois and Meyer Barash, *Man, Play, and Games* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 19-26. In regards to these categories usefulness to thinking about video games and media experiences see Andrew Darley, *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres* (Routledge, 2002), 168-73.

hand, games that operate primarily through competition and chance (*agôn* and *alea*), and, on the other hand, games of simulation and vertigo. Those games that operate primarily by engaging modes of *agôn* and *alea* are activities that the state has a precedent in regulating such as gambling, races, and other competitive sports. These are activities with quantitative scores, wins and losses, and potential stakes in relation to status. We could even note that, based on past precedent, the Court would be justified in regulating activities that primarily operate through these modes of experience in the same way they have regulated professional sports and gambling.

As modes of *(game)play*, *agôn* and *alea* have very little to do with film and aesthetic reception, but the same cannot be said about *mimicry and ilinx* Meanwhile, the alternative modes to skill and chance have a significant overlap with prior aesthetic forms. For Caillois, simulation is directly related to notions of the mimetic faculty and the creative capacity to imagine scenarios or worlds without doing so for a larger practical purpose. For Caillois, simulation is not only both about the creation of that imagined space, but also about the receptive suspension of disbelief that allows the player to take on a "new personality," first through "mimicry" in a pure imitative fashion and extends to "wearing a mask, or *playing a part*."[78] Adam Lowenstein specifically talks about Caillois' *mimicry* to explain how the film "spectator is…engaged in acts of imaginative imitation, forgetting herself as she enters the film's world." For Lowenstein, *mimicry* is an expression of a "desire to get lost in the world of the game (or the film)" as well as "in the author's imagination"—ideas we will return to in our third chapter.[79]

Of the dimensions of *gameplay* fostered by games, *ilinx* is the alternate mode of sensation that "consist[s] of an attempt to momentarily destroy stability of perception and inflict a kind of

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[78] Caillois and Barash, *Man, Play, and Games*, 19-26. Lowenstein, *Dreaming of Cinema: Spectatorship, Surrealism, & the Age of Digital Media*, 41, 26-52.This argument is made through an understanding of the way Caillois uses the term mimicry in an earlier essay on insect camouflage. See Caillois, Roger. "Mimicry and legendary psychasthenia" October 31 (1984): 16-32.
[79] Lowenstein, *Dreaming of Cinema: Spectatorship, Surrealism, & the Age of Digital Media*, 41, 26-52. Lowenstein focuses on how ay Caillois uses the term mimicry in a different essay regarding on insect camouflage. Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia."

voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind."[80] The most simple example of this, one which

Caillois notably identifies in more species then just humans, is the act of spinning around until one is

dizzy (hence "vertigo"). In some ways, this mode of play is more readily physiological than *mimicry*

because of the fact that, for many of Caillois' examples, the body itself needs to undergo some sort

of physical stimulation to illicit *vertigo*. The examples are numerous (and may overlap with

competitive aspects of *agôn*): dancing, horseback riding, skiing, carnival rides, mountain climbing etc.

The commonality here is that all these examples a kinesthetic stimulation to the player's body as the

chief method for inducing this altered state of experience.

Yet we can also recognize that much of the way *ilinx* is explained corresponds is through a

recognition of an induced, altered state of consciousness, one we might directly connect to the mode

of perception that we associate with spectacle in film spectatorship and movement like "cinema of

attractions" and the formal avant garde.[81] In regard to the cinema of attractions, Tom Gunning

explains that these attractions "directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and

supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle…" Like *ilinx*, the pleasure of an attraction's

spectacle does not need to be filtered through intense cognitive interpretation; the pleasure comes

directly from experiencing the moving images as displayed. Gunning explains "confrontation rules

the cinema of attractions both in the form of its films and their mode of exhibition. The directness

of this act of display allows an emphasis on the thrill itself—the immediate reaction of the viewer."

It is an address that connects directly back to other forms of popular attractions of the 19th century,

that are some of the exact examples Caillois uses to explain *ilinx* including the illusionist's act, the

carnival side show, the merry-go-round. Gunning explains, "many trick films are, in effect, plotless, a

series of transformations strung together with little connection and certainly no

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[80] Caillois and Barash, *Man, Play, and Games*, 23.
[81] For more on this see Darley, *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres*.

characterization…the story simply provides a frame upon which to string a demonstration of the magical possibilities of the cinema."[82] Similarly *ilinx* requires no real context to be experienced; it is just a mode of perception open to affective titillation, a novel experience in the tradition of a thrill ride.

While gambling and sports are hardly mentioned in *Brown*, a few strains of argumentation within *Brown* come close to a making a somewhat comparable argument that playing some video games might be considered conduct that could be regulated. Specifically, Justice Breyer, who sided with California in *Brown*, argues that if "physical activity [were] to predominate in a game, government could appropriately intervene…such as when restricting the sale of toys presenting physical dangers to children." What is interesting about Breyer's logic is that conduct is related to physical activity which connects video game playing to sports. Still Breyer also acknowledges that video games are somewhat different than physical activities because: "video games also embody important expressive and artistic elements, [so] the First Amendment significantly limits the State's power to regulate."[83] What we see here is that Caillois modes of play help define the aspects of play within video games that seem correlated with this expressive elements, and encounters that comprise the video game experience in a way that breaks down barriers between media.

Petersen criticizes the Court's decision for failing to adequately articulate whose expression is being protected in regards to video games when she argues that the Court's ruling "conflates the freedom of creators to design with the freedom of users to play" by overvaluing the screen qualities and "confus[ing] the visible interface with the program itself."[84] What Petersen fails to recognize, however, is that this is exactly the point being made here in Breyer's suggestion that it is the video

[82] Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (in) Credulous Spectator," *Film Theory: Critical concepts in media and cultural studies* 3 (2004): 85-86.
[83] Breyer's Dissent *Brown V. Ema*, 2765.
[84] Petersen, "Behind the Screen," 173-74.

games themselves that "embody" the expressive and aesthetic qualities being protected. The conflation and "fetishization" is indeed part of the way these video games are experienced. To divorce the material form from the way they are experienced is to grossly misunderstand what makes expressive forms exceptional. The logic the Court ultimately relies upon to place video games into a cultural lineage with film, novels, and comic books provides a crucial response to Petersen's critique because it accounts for her failure to recognize the *immaterial* qualities of the aesthetic object which must be factored into the experience. The Court recognizes that the protected expression is not located exclusively in the production or reception of the cultural object, but it is in the culturally constructed, imaginary relationship between the two that becomes embedded into the object as experienced.

The Court's logic is related to a crucially disregarded feature of video games that provides a profound reason to place them in a lineage of expressive media, before thinking about them in terms of games. It is something Eric Zimmerman comes close to articulating in his introduction to the *Characteristics of Games* when he says that "[video] games are different from other game [types] in one very important way: they are almost all *deliberately designed*."[85] While the term "design" implies an association with "functionality" that we will analyze more in the next chapter, what Zimmerman calls "deliberate design" provides a categorical departure that few game scholars acknowledge—all video games are intentionally created to be subsequently experienced. This is opposed to what Zimmerman calls "evolved" games, which emerge as experience without any sense of intentionality and can be *played* endlessly. Video games utilizing *mimicry* and *ilinx*, especially narrative or exploration based games, are much more productive to apprehend as *authored expressions*.[86]

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[85] My Italics. Elias, Garfield, and Gutschera, *Characteristics of Games*, 4-5.
[86] One caveat is that the difference between limited and limitless texts. In theory, procedurally generated worlds are both authored and unauthored. When a video game like *Minecraft* allow users to create sub-worlds, it is perhaps better understood as a platform.

The term "authored," should not conjure the image of a singular author or ascribe authority over a video game's meaning, but instead it should connote an "author function" in a more Foucauldian sense. In "What is an Author?" Michel Foucault describes the somewhat abstract relationship between the creator of an aesthetic object and the eventual beholder through the figure of the author. Authorship is not about creating a specific meaning, but providing a space where meaning can be made: "Writing unfolds like a game (*jeu*) that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits. In writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is, rather, a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears."[87] Thinking about video games as *authored experiences* provides a way for understanding how players are oriented to the game as creative work in which they are uncovering the purposeful expressions embedded into the object. While video games include variability, the player is also always operating within the parameters set forth by the video game designer. Just as a filmmaker or novelist creates a text that engenders a receptive experience, so too does the video game designer. What it means to think about the authored expression embedded into the video game an aesthetic experience, however, is something we will continue to examine in the coming chapters.

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[87] Michel Foucault and Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 101.

CHAPTER 2

Video Game Interactivity between Art and Design

2.1   MOMA AND INTERACTION

In 2012, under the guidance of curator Paula Antonelli, The Museum of Modern Art began

acquiring video games into its permanent collection.[88] While this was not the first occasion that

video games had been publicly acknowledged by a major art institution,[89] for many onlookers,

MoMA's decision to begin collecting and displaying games suggested this precise sentiment

expressed by *The New York Times*: "If you have been disparaging video games…it's time to think

again. Video games are now high culture, with the imprimatur of the Museum of Modern Art…"[90]

Whereas the Museum of the Moving Image or the Museum of Play had both previously collected

video games alongside other pop-culture ephemera, MoMA's venture ostensibly provided an

indisputable signal that the gatekeepers of aesthetic taste and value had granted video games

approval for critical admiration and recognition outside subcultural confines and alongside revered

works of art.[91]

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[88] Paola Antonelli to Inside/Out: A MoMA/MoMA PS1 Blog, November 29, 2012,
http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/11/29/video-games-14-in-the-collection-for-starters/; Paola
Antonelli, Kate Carmody, and Paul Galloway, "Applied Design to Feature Fourteen Recently Acquired Video Games on
View for the First Time (Press Release)," news release, 2/14, 2013.

[89] The Smithsonian American Art Museum's had almost concurrently put on its exhibition *The Art of Video Games* and
the exhibition "Game On" had been touring continuously in various institutions, including art museums since 2002. See

[90] Allan Kozinn, "Moma Acquires Video Games," *The New York Times: Artsbeat* 2012. Also see Chris Sueelletrop, "A
Museum's Games Are Not on Pedestals," *The New York Times*, March 3, 2013 2013. and Brian Crecente, "New Moma
Exhibit Embraces the Art of Video Games as It Explores Their Design," (2013),
http://www.polygon.com/2013/3/4/4054916/moma-video-game-applied-design.

[91] In his dissertation video game, scholar Felan Parker contextualizes MoMA's decision to acquire video games within a
broader "concerted effort to incorporate games into an increasingly influential art world assemblage and a particular
conception of design and the aesthetic" See Felan Parker, "Playing Games with Art: The Cultural and Aesthetic

Without overstating MoMA's cultural import, we should acknowledge that MoMA's curatorial decisions historically have carried an outsized influence in defining the artistic merits of certain cultural forms during the last century—something made apparent when looking at MoMA's extraordinary role in establishing a prior popular moving-image medium—film—as a distinct artistic form. In that capacity, MoMA was the first major art institution to take film seriously in the United States, and scholar Haidee Wasson explains that when MoMA founded what later became its Film department in its storied Film Library, the museum had publicly "declared film a modern art with an important history [by] provid[ing] cinema a prominent institutional home alongside other traditional and emergent aesthetic forms."[92] Effectively, MoMA changed the entire cultural discourse surrounding film as a medium. As Wasson explains, "film study programs and film societies at universities, museums, and libraries were, literally made possible by MoMA's circulating programs."[93] Indeed, MoMA's legacy in today's academic film studies is still felt in the pivotal role it served in the establishment of the preeminent scholarly organization focusing on film, today known as the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, which, as the organization's website explains, "grew out of a series of meetings held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City starting in 1957."[94] In regards to film scholarship, then, MoMA was more than a slight contributor to a broader social phenomenon; its pioneering curatorial decisions profoundly impacted the academic discourse of film studies. Consequently, as the museum once again finds itself incorporating a popular moving-image medium into its permanent collection, MoMA's potential influence over the cultural and critical reception of video games should not be underestimated.

Legitimation of Digital Games" (York & Ryerson Universities, 2014), 165. See also Felan Parker, "An Art World for Artgames," *Loading… The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 7, no. 11 (2013).

[92] Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 5; Antonelli, Carmody, and Galloway, "Applied Design."

[93] Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema.*

[94] "Organizational History," Society For Cinema and Media Studies, http://www.cmstudies.org/?page=org_history.

In fact, there are some striking historical resonances between MoMA's approach to video games and its initial collection of film. When MoMA publicly made the curatorial decision to collect video games in 2012, it was precisely 40 years after the first video game console, the Magnavox *Odyssey* was released to the public in 1972; and, when MoMA established its Film Library in 1935, it was likewise 40 years after the Lumière Brothers' first public moving picture exhibitions in 1895. Without assuming any intentionality behind these 40-year timeframes, the correspondence still reflects the analogous journeys of these media towards being considered culturally mature enough to be recognized by a preeminent artistic institution. On both occasions, MoMA was a pioneering force in making a public case about the merit of these media, and for both MoMA initially faced a popular backlash from those who felt that high-art was being diffused by its associations with a medium associated primarily with popular commercial entertainment. That is, Wasson recounts the early ridicule MoMA faced in the press when it began to take film seriously,[95] and we once again have the highbrow reaction of art critic Jonathon Jones's editorial for *The Guardian* responding to MoMA's video game collection with the blunt headline, "Sorry MoMA, Video Games are not Art."[96] If nothing else, we see that in the roughly 80 years between the MoMA's forays into both film and video game collection, the institution's decisions are still regarded as a cultural indicator in perpetual debates about popular entertainment and "high art."[97]

In hindsight, there is little doubt that MoMA ended up on the right side of the cultural debate with its early consecration of film as an artistic medium worthy of thoughtful engagement. In the decades since MoMA's Film Library was established, its assertion that film should be considered,

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[95] Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema.*

[96] Jonathon Jones to Jonathon Jones on Art, November 30, 2012. See also Brian Moriarty, "Comment Is Free: In Brief: Video Games Are Not Art, Regardless of Cultural Evolution," *The Guardian (London, England)* 2013.

[97] It is also worth noting MoMA's relatively abandoned attempt of treating television as an art form. For more on this see: Lynn Spiegel Lynn Spigel, *Tv by Design: Modern Art and the Rise of Network Television* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

in Wasson's words, "a new modern art [to] be collected, saved, studied, and, most important, seen"[98] has since become conventional wisdom. What is much less certain is whether MoMA's acquisition of video games carries any of the equivalent claims for video games. The fact is, that despite historical parallels, MoMA conceives of its video game collection quite differently than it initially considered film—the chief distinction being that the video game collection lacks an equivalent institutional space to MoMA's foundational Film Library. Instead, the video game acquisitions were conspicuously made by MoMA's Department of Architecture and Design and rhetorically couched within an ongoing effort to bring "interaction design objects" into the design collection.

The pairing between video games and the Department of Architecture and Design at MoMA was by no means inevitable. When Antonelli made the press-grabbing headlines about the institution's concerted effort to collect video games into its permanent collection, this was not actually the first time MoMA had acquired a video game. Four years prior, in 2008, MoMA's Department of Media and Performance acquired artist Feng Menbo's installation work *Long March: Restart,* which MoMA classified as a "Video Game" in the official catalogue.[99] Further, Media and Performance, established in 2006, might seem like a more fitting institutional home for video games considering the department's proclaimed interest in new media, a prior collection of "moving images, film installations, video, motion- and sound-based works," and other "time-based art."[100] On the other hand, starting a collection of mainstream video games—most of which are unabashedly commercial products in a larger ecosystem of the entertainment industry—would clash with the Media and Performance department's propensity for conceptual gallery installations and works associated immediately with high art, as epitomized by prominent exhibitions like *Marina Abramović:*

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[98]Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema*, 3.

[99] This observation is also made by John Sharp, *Works of Game: On the Aesthetics of Games and Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015).

[100] http://press.moma.org/curatorial-departments/

The Artist Is Present or its collection works by Nam June Paik. That is to say, the works collected by

the Media and Performance department, including *Long March: Restart,* are often created for

exhibition in museums, mostly by established artists, and so the works in this collection are

essentially declared "high art" well before they are thought about in terms of their medium.

Meanwhile, popular video games, like the-MoMA-acquired *Street Fighter II*, carry no such pretentions.

(Although the same observation might be made about John Ford's *The Iron Horse* [1924], one of the

first films acquired by MoMA in 1935 within the institutional space of the Film Library).

In this sense, mainstream video games are meant to reside within a class of cultural objects

that ostensibly lack the artistic posturing found in the Media and Performance department. All the

while, MoMA institutionally maintains plausible deniability in regards to making any definitive claims

about video games as a "new modern art" as it once had for both film and photography, when

MoMA respectively established those departments in 1935 and 1940. Like many major art

institutions, it seems MoMA still maintains significant organizational distinctions around the

"applied art" found in the design collection. This point was effectively emphasized by Antonelli in a

presentation she gave on MoMA's video game collection when she diffidently denied accusations

that she or her department had provided any role in proclaiming video games to be an art form: "did

I ever say that [video games] were art? *Pac-Man* and *Tetris* are two floors away from Picasso and Van

Gogh."[101] Her statement implies that the individual objects in the design collection might be

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[101] Paola Antonelli, "Why I Brought Pac-Man to Moma" (paper presented at the Ted: Ideas Worth Spreading, New York City, 2013). As a matter of fact, Antonelli has publicly sent mixed messages about whether or not she thinks that video games should be thought of as an art form. Previously Antonelli had quite clearly declared that she considers video games to be a unique art form. In the initial blog post announcing the video game collection, she called video games "a new category of artworks in MoMA's collection" and rhetorically asked and answered, "Are video games art? They sure are, but they are also design, and a design approach is what we chose for this new foray into this universe." Antonelli Video Game Collection.
 Part of the confusion surrounding these statements may be that Antonelli has made the case that divisions between art and design should be abolished. Her logic might be that an object's well-defined functionality does not preclude its form classification as an "art form," or possibly that an aesthetic form can have easily definable design functions—either argument would be an even more radically counter-Kantian then merely arguing that design objects can be "aesthetically appealing." See again Antonelli, "Pac-Man to Moma."

declared worthy of appreciation, but MoMA is by no means equating them with the established

"artworks" attributed to canonical "artists" and found in the "fine art" work within, say, the

Department of Painting and Sculpture.

In the curatorial statement that accompanied MoMA's video games through multiple

exhibitions, Antonelli's careful phrasing explicitly incorporates video games into MoMA's

established posture toward design objects:

> *as with all other design objects in MoMA's collection—from posters to chairs to cars to fonts— [the video games in MoMA's collection] are historically and culturally significant, aesthetically appealing, functionally and structurally ingenious, and innovative in how they approach technology and behavioral design.*[102]

While it is clear is that video games, like other design objects, are not precluded from being

appreciated on aesthetic terms, their "aesthetic appeal" is relegated to one of many qualifications

justifying a worthiness within MoMA's collection. In this context, the "aesthetic appeal" suggests

something of a gratuitous layer of beauty superfluous to the object's core purpose. If anything, a

design object is more readily identified as such precisely because its "aesthetic appeal" is not

primary; the design object must function chiefly outside of an aesthetic discourse. Only then will it

be available for an intervention by MoMA's design curators, who conscientiously uplift this object's

place into a museum, and enable it to be appreciated as something worthy of admiration.

In this way, MoMA's posture towards video games fits in with its established tradition of

drawing attention to the formal qualities of functional objects, a mission that routinely delights in

taking overlooked, quotidian objects—even mass-manufactured items— and imbuing them with the

prestige of a high-art institution. For MoMA, this tradition of recontextualizing cultural artifacts has

been going at least since its monumental 1934 Exhibition of Machine Art, which made the

historically radical curatorial decision to display "springs, gears, cables, chemical capsules, carpet

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[102] Antonelli, Carmody, and Galloway, "Applied Design."

sweepers, and kitchen cabinets...among [other] useful objects...not on the basis of their usefulness but for their beauty of form, finish and material."[103] MoMA's progressive suggestion, expressed first in the Exhibition of Machine Art, has never been about recontextualizing design objects as functionless work solely existing for the purpose of aesthetic expression à la found art; rather it has been about making an argument that even if an object is created for a wholly purposeful and functional role it can be re-contextualized and then be appreciated aesthetically.[104] In this way, MoMA's design team wields a particular cultural authority in its ability to lift functional objects out of inconspicuousness so that they may be re-encountered through a newfound appreciation of their form.

However, instead of focusing on the interactive design as promised, the rhetoric surrounding the collection seemed to consider the video games as art objects. MoMA Antonelli's initial blog post and press release declared video games as "a new category of artworks in MoMA's collection"—a message that led to headlines like "The 14 Video Games MoMA just Classified as Art" and "Art Tested MoMA Approved."[105] Crucially, similar rhetoric about MoMA's conception of its video game collections seeped into the exhibitions displays, where any effort to focus on individual video game's design was lost to a broad celebration of the video games collected. The 14 initial games displayed

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[103] MoMA, "International Style for Architecture and Exhibition of Machine Art (Press Release)," news release, March 5th, 1934, moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/162/releases/MOMA_1933-34_0029_1934-03-01.pdf?2010.

[104] This perspective has some resonance with video game scholar Graeme Kirkpatrick who focuses more than anything else on the experiences fostered by video games. To Kirkpatrick defining video games as "art" is irrelevant because, regardless, they foster aesthetic experiences. Following an understanding stemming from Kant and Jauques Ranciere, Kirkpatrick argues that "[v]ideo games inherit certain of their key properties, especially form, from an art world that has to some extent absented itself from important areas of experience." Graeme Kirkpatrick, *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game* (Manchester; New York; New York: Manchester University Press ; distributed in the United States exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 15.

[105]Moriarty, "Comment Is Free: In Brief: Video Games Are Not Art, Regardless of Cultural Evolution." "Art Tested MoMA Approved" in *The Atlantic*. Scott Meslow, "The 14 Video Games New York's Moma Just Classified as Art," *Mental Floss* (2012), http://mentalfloss.com/article/31649/14-video-games-new-yorks-moma-just-classified-art. Esther Zuckerman, "Video Games: Art-Tested, Moma-Approved," *The Atlantic* (2017), http://www.theatlanticwire.com/entertainment/2012/11/video-games-art-tested-moma-approved/59446/. Mental FlossCrecente, "New Moma Exhibit Embraces the Art of Video Games as It Explores Their Design".

were mostly done with conspicuously minimalist displays, the consoles were hidden behind a blank wall so that only a screen was visible, along with a shelf underneath that held a set of headphones, and, depending on the game, a controller. Only some of the games were playable while others merely had continuously running demos. In exhibiting these games, MoMA's decision to avoid arcade cabinets and platforms in favor of the display was ostensibly supposed to enable the visitor to focus on the visual interface of the games, while avoiding the historical associations of the arcade cabinet and the nostalgic associations of video game culture. However, in exclusively highlighting these games in terms of their visual interface, MoMA was also obscuring the literal software and hardware behind the games, a decision that significantly undermines MoMA's contention that they are interested in these objects as objects.

My aim here is not to simply to chastise MoMA for neglecting to thoroughly articulate its interest in collecting, admiring, exhibiting, and preserving video games. If anything, MoMA's mixed messages regarding video games merely suggests a broader cultural and scholarly ambivalence about how to contextualize video games in relation to other cultural traditions, and, relatedly, how scholars should apprehend them critically. More so than film or literature, video games are wedged between the discourses of design and aesthetics, and, while these discourses are not mutually exclusive, they do provide vastly disparate accounts of the basic constitution of video games as texts, and how we experience these games. Much of the difference, we shall see, hinges around the term interactivity, which seems to have a very different connotation when it is understood in terms of material design compared to aesthetic reception.

2.1.1 Framing Aesthetic and Design Discourses

The case can certainly be made that video games should be apprehended both in terms of design and aesthetics. After all, discourses of aesthetics and design can certainly overlap. When it comes to

fashion and architecture, to take two prominent examples, functional design and aesthetic beauty can be apprehended as inseparable qualities. A dress by Alexander McQueen or a building by Zaha Hadid, might be described in aesthetic terms—beautiful, excessive, and open-to-interpretation—while also being understood through terms associated with design—useful, calculated, and functional. Certainly, merely having a practical use-value does not prevent a given object from being apprehended in aesthetic terms. Likewise, high-art objects hanging in museums have had functional applications in certain contexts—a Renaissance painting may have been used to absolve a patron's sins, or a portrait, as John Berger points out functions as "an advertisement for the sitter's good fortune, prestige and wealth."[106] In this sense, an object's properties do not determine how it will be apprehended. As Raymond Williams noted, this is part of what led Jan Mukarovsky to the idea that "an active capacity for the aesthetic function is not a real property of an object…rather, the aesthetic function manifests itself only under certain conditions, i.e. in a certain social context."[107] Another way of putting it is Dabney Townsend's observation that the "aesthetic objects are what artists produce, museum directors collect, critics criticize, and librarians put on their shelves in some classification."[108] In other words, aesthetic objects are those artifacts that we, as a society, principally consider through discourse of aesthetics. Any object can be an aesthetic object, as long it is apprehended as such. But what does it to apprehend an object through an aesthetic discourse?

While it may be futile to define the essential properties of the aesthetic object, describing its relationship with design is still a tremendously productive way of understanding how cultural artefacts are apprehended critically. In a space like MoMA, for instance, we could say that the

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[106] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, vol. 1 (Penguin uK, 2008), 111.

[107] Jan Mukarovsky, "Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts, Trans," *M. Suino* (1936): 3. as quoted inRaymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, vol. 1 (Oxford Paperbacks, 1977), 153. For more on this approach see Winfried Fluck, "Aesthetics and Cultural Studies," *Aesthetics in a multicultural age* (2002). Elsewhere Fluck quotes Mukarovsky as follows: "The aesthetic is neither the property of an object, nor is it tied to particular qualities of the object." Jan Mukarovsky, "The Problem of Functions in Architecture," *Zeitschrift fur Semiotik* 5, no. 3 (1983). in Winfried Fluck, "Imaginary Space; or, Space as Aesthetic Object," *Space in America: Theory, History, Culture* 1 (2005).

[108] Dabney Townsend, *Aesthetic Objects and Works of Art* (Wolfeboro, N.H: Longwood Academic, 1989), 86.

aesthetic object and the design object effectively exist on either ends of a rhetorical continuum centered on the perceived qualities related to "practicality," "usability," and "applicability." The aesthetic function is an internal and conceptual function, but a design function is a concrete target in the social world. This discursive construction maintains a rift between the fine arts and the applied arts. The painter, writer, music composer, and filmmaker are *artists* producing objects perceived to exist to be experienced, but the music hall's architect, the book cover's graphic designer, and the film set's constructor are *designers* producing objects perceived to exist in the service of something outside themselves. The artwork and the artist remain attached to purposeless aesthetics, while the designed object and the designer are associated with a discourse of functional utility.

Product designer and scholar Anthony Dunne contemplates the dynamic between aesthetics and design by explaining that the design object "must be understood rather than interpreted." [109] Critically engaging with the design object's form is about attaining comprehension. The design critic evaluates the design object's mechanisms to understand better how the object "works" and the object can be assessed in terms of *efficiency* and *user-friendliness*. More importantly, we only stop to evaluate the design object when we are given reason to do so, when it is pulled out of its useful context. In this sense, a well-designed object—not unlike the Heideggerian hammer—functionally exists without us our notice.[110] In this sense, we are more likely to recognize bad design and occasions when a design object frustrates us. When it comes to good design, however, we may only

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[109] In his rumination on digital objects, product designer and scholar Anthony Dunne contemplates the dynamic between aesthetics and design. "*In the human factors world, objects, it seems, must be understood rather than interpreted. This raises the question: are conventional notions of user-friendliness compatible with aesthetic experience? Perhaps with aesthetics, a different path must be taken: an aesthetic approach might subsume and subvert the idea of user-friendliness and provide an alternative model of interactivity.*" While Dunne wonders to what extent aesthetics and design are mutually exclusive, he understands these concepts indicate profoundly different, and somewhat oppositional, modes of engagement with a given object. Dunne's initial assumption is that "interactivity" is synonymous with user-friendliness, and user-friendliness implies a framework of design. This is, after all, the same logic MoMA's uses to classify video games as design objects. Anthony Dunne, *Hertzian Tales: Electronic Products, Aesthetic Experience, and Critical Design*, vol. 2005 (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005), 23-24. The "human factors world" that Dunne refers to is essentially the design world.

[110] G. Harman, "Technology, Objects and Things in Heidegger," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 34, no. 1 (2009).

notice it when prompted to; perhaps when it is displayed in a museum or when tasked to build an object from scratch.

If the design object's operative function is unambiguous, the aesthetic object is identified in part because its operative function is difficult or impossible to discern. We must apprehend the aesthetic object as one imbued with intentionality, but the precise ends of that intention are indeterminate.[111] When one contemplates an object through an aesthetic framework, we can reflect on what it means or how it makes us feel, and, in this sense, it can be interpreted without being understood. Still we can also reflect on our experience of the aesthetic object by considering what it represents, what it signifies, and why it exists.

At least part of the logic in MoMA's conception of video games seems to be that if a video game "works"—if it is "playable"— it should be understood as a design object. The term "design" is itself rarely, if ever, defined in practice and it remains a sorely under-theorized term for describing a kind of aesthetic authorship. When the term "design" is employed in disciplines ranging from mathematics and information theory to aesthetic theory and game development, it implies a certain practical functionality, a notion of a purposive plan being executed through an object, device, or machine.[112] This idea is central to "game design." As computer programs that can "run" on a platform, a video game must be built with some baseline amount of proficiency. Video games are *applications* quite literally comprised of mathematical and logical functions and the functions must be free from error enough to be able instruct a computational machine to render an image onto a screen. Moreover, the image must be intelligible enough that it will instruct users or players how to

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[111] In other words, Kant's notion of "purposiveness without a purpose."

[112] In *Rules of Play - Game Design Fundamentals*, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman boil a few definitions and "offer the following general definition: 'Design is the process by which a designer creates a context to be encountered by a participant, from which meaning emerges.'" This, I believe, is a hopelessly hazy characterization that only raises more questions. What is a "designer"? What is a "context"? What is "meaning"? How does meaning "emerge"? See Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *The Game Design Reader : A Rules of Play Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 53-59.

render additional images according to some schema. This, it seems, is the essence of video games in terms of interaction design. As Antonelli's explains in her curatorial statement accompanying the collection:

> *The video games featured here are landmarks in [the] highly innovative and increasingly ubiquitous field [of interaction design]…The quality of the interaction translates in the digital world what the synthesis of form and function represents in the physical one. The criteria by which each game was selected consider many aspects of interaction design, including visual quality, the architecture of the digital space, the types of behavior that the game elicits, and even the elegance of the code that makes it work.* [113]

Whereas, in the "physical" world, the function of a chair is material and tangible, in the digital world, the function is only understood in terms of what allows the digital object to be experienced in the first place, its interactivity with a player or observer. Video games are, in this sense, designed because they are premeditated expressions, calculated procedures. The tantalizing equation made here is that "quality of interaction" is the digital equivalent of "the synthesis of form and function." Interactive objects are intrinsically tied to the realm of functionality, and, assuring that that an object just "works." The very existence of interaction in an object, enables the evaluative design terminology of efficiency and user-friendliness. Interactive design, provides the understanding that the object has a mutable form that is structured to vary responsively to user input.

MoMA's curatorial statement focuses on the constituent "aspects" of the form—the visuals, the level design as represented through the "architecture of the digital space," the ability to foster affective responses, and the code itself. These individual components, it is effectively argued, are examples of interaction design that together allow the video game to be operable. A video game is a carefully plotted arrangement of encoded protocols, which, when subsequently executed, instruct computational hardware in the process of rendering a program. Through the framework of design, the video game is an object, one that should be understood informatically. It is a code providing a

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[113] Antonelli, Carmody, and Galloway, "Applied Design." According to sources in the department contacted by email correspondence with departmental staff, the content of this curatorial statement was written by Antonelli.

set of procedural protocols that produce a series of material operations in relation to a platform. This approach advocates investigating video games principally in terms of their material, mathematical, logical, technological, and functional structures, while the interpretations and explorations of a greater meaning are essentially ignored.

The most fitting illustration of what it means to apprehend video games through a design framework is Ben Fry's data visualization of *Pac-Man*, which was acquired by the Architecture and Design department four years prior to when it acquired *Pac-Man* as a video game. In Fry's *Distellamap (Pac-Man)*, he uses processing software to translate and visualize the basic binary and image data contained within the original Atari 2600 cartridge version of *Pac-Man*. Fry's software draws lines illustrating the cross-references in the code, mapping out the complex web of logic that defines the rules of the game's hidden operations (Figure 02.1-A).
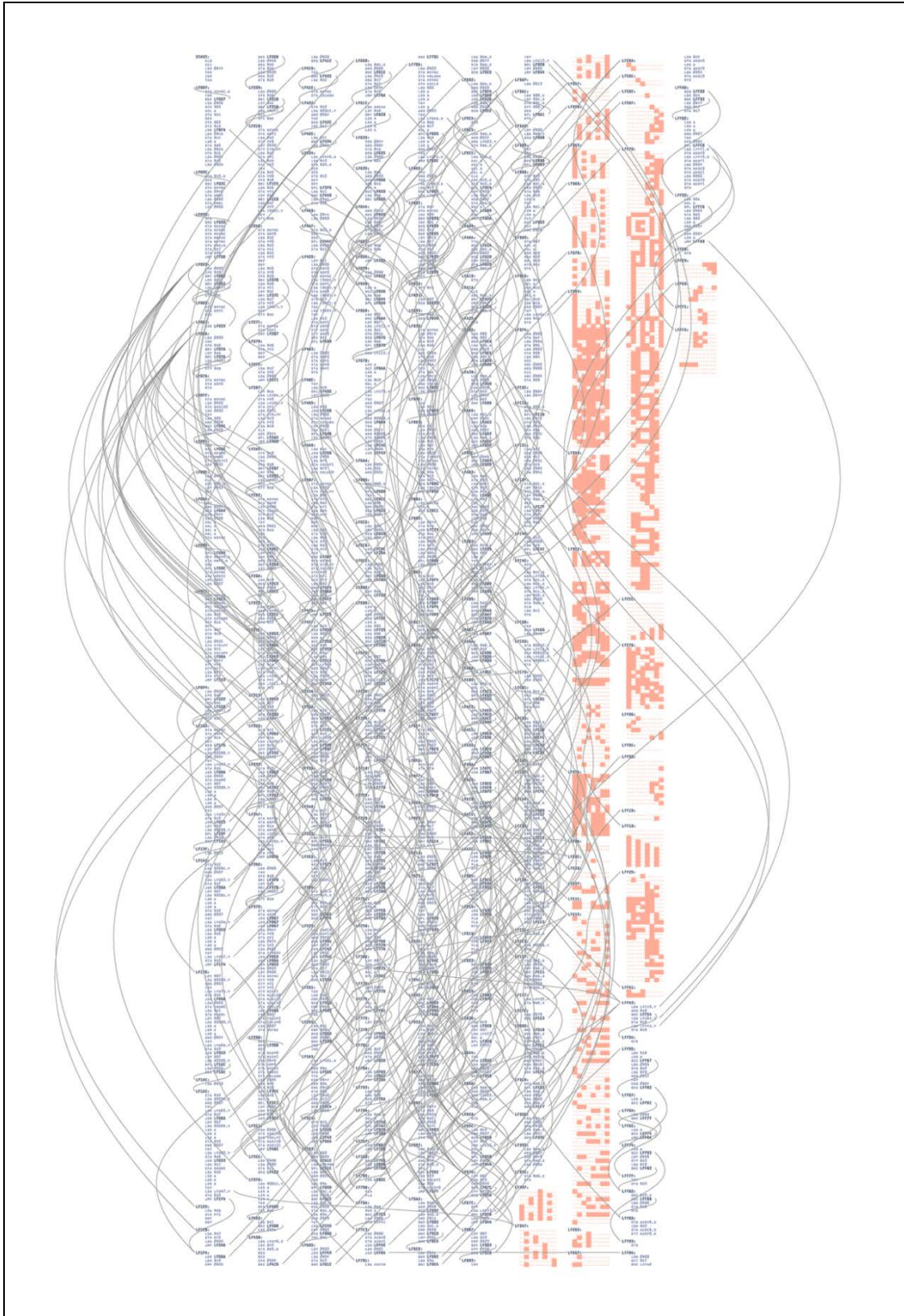
Figure 2.1-A. *Distellimap (Pac-Man)* by Ben Fry.

When apprehended through a design framework, *Pac-Man* is anatomized into its component pieces networked in an elaborate logical schema. The larger video game is understood as one comprised of the relational functions of constituent fragments, each of which is read with a defined purpose in the service of the whole. Consequently, the critical approach to the video game is focused on comprehending how a game "works" and positivistically charting the logic behind its expression. Instead of interpreting its meaning as we might with a film, our orientation is one of admiration of the video game in terms of technical ingenuity and detailed craftsmanship. Like the techno-materialist approach advocated by Kirschenbaum and Parrika discussed in chapter 1, MoMA fundamentally understands video games materially; they are operational protocols, written in code, that instruct computational hardware—and perhaps other software—in the service of generating a program that runs on a platform.[114] All video games can, it fact, be described in this way, as perhaps can all software whether Microsoft Excel, Norton Antivirus, or a BIOS. This idea was echoed in an email exchange with MoMA Collection Specialist Paul Galloway, who explained that:

> *In our minds we don't really separate video games from other forms of interactive design or software. We also have websites, digital fonts, and an app (Biophilia). Video games are, of course, very different from those, but we view them as part of a continuum of designers helping humans interact with machines.*

To MoMA, video games are simply illustrations of interactive design within computer software, and are not categorically different from any interfacing software requiring input from a human user in the course of operating. [115] The "machines" with whom the humans are interacting, would

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[114] Although to make this claim one should disagree with Kittler and take as a given that software exists. For more see Friedrich Kittler, "There Is No Software," *ctheory* (1995).

[115] Interaction design focuses on the aspects of the material design that allow the video games to function, but in what sense can we say video games are functional? Video games, like the broader category of games, are meant to be played, but as will discussed in the Chapter 3, "play," like aesthetics, is often identified through in its contrast to practicality social use. Other formal categories in the applied arts, such as fashion, architecture, industrial production, ceramics, and textiles, are all associated with an articulable easily definable in our social world. And certainly, for objects within the collection, such as Apple's iPhone or an Eames' chair, the relationship to their larger function is clear. Along these lines Antonelli at one point equates the design of "a stool or a helicopter" with that of "an interface or a video game" by explaining that "digital code takes the place of wood or plastic." Antonelli, Carmody, and Galloway, "Applied Design.".

presumably be the platforms running the games or it may be the game itslef. Either way, interaction

design connotes a relationship between the user and the program that is literally embedded into the

material structure of the video game itself.

And yet, one of the overlooked difficulties in debates involving the term "interactive"—or

the related variants "interact," "interactivity," and "interaction"—is distinguishing to what the terms

are being applied. When, for instance, the both sides arguing in the *Brown* Supreme Court case

describe video games as "interactive," are they talking about the game itself or the experience of

playing that video game? Even Scalia argues that video games provide more interactivity than other

media. Does this mean interactivity can be measured? MoMA, it seems, relies on the same rhetorical

usage found in the field of Human-Computer Interaction, which certainly refers to interaction as if it

can be measured. Still, would such a measurement be quantitative or qualitative? Can it be measured

through material qualities in the design or through subjective, contextual assessments? It remains

unclear if the material object is interactive, or only the experience fostered by those qualities of the

object is interactive. The difference of where interactivity is located may be subtle, but it is an

important part of understanding video games' relation to forms such as film and literature.

2.1.2 Locating Interactivity

Considering how many scholars have attempted to define the term "interactivity," it is no wonder

many new media and video game scholars are weary of the term.[116] Epsen Aarseth, for one, rejects

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The problem with this analogy is that stools and helicopters have external uses in context; these are physical objects designed to be "used" in ways that require no interpretation. Video games are quite distinct from the common categories of applied arts in MoMA's Architecture and Design collection precisely because, as a category, they do not have a clear function. Although they may be comprised of individually purposeful components, as a whole, video games are not tools calculated for practical ends.

[116] Within the humanities, see for example Erik P Bucy, "Interactivity in Society: Locating an Elusive Concept," *The information society* 20, no. 5 (2004); David Z. Saltz, "The Art of Interaction: Interactivity, Performativity, and Computers,"

its use altogether, making the case that interactivity suggests "various vague ideas of computer screens, user freedom, and personalized media, while denoting nothing." Even before Lev Manovich, Aarseth sees "interactivity" as ideologically problematic for implying a techno-teleology of the computer-age that starkly separates old and new media; the former becomes associated with a more democratic two-way participation involved with the production and consumption of knowledge, while the latter is associated with the indoctrinating qualities of top-down, one-way stream of information.[117] However, while Aarseth abandons the term, Manovich uses "interaction" to describe a quality of aesthetic reception in media that existed prior to the digital. Therefore, for Manovich the "myth of interactivity," is about those who mistake interactivity as a defining quality of "new media." Galloway, meanwhile, expresses more ambivalence about using the term, at one point arguing that Manovich's "claim about the 'myth of interactivity' [is] misguided: yes, the term 'interactive' is practically meaningless due to overuse, but that does not mean the term should apply willy-nilly to static works of art."[118] Galloway's suggestion here is that if interactivity connotes anything, it is a quality of the "non-static" object.

Regardless of these varying opinions, "interactivity" remains a pervasive term in both academic and popular discourses alike as it seems to insinuate something both novel and noteworthy about the encounter between humans and digital objects. So, even if Manovich is right in arguing that interactivity in nothing new, it remains a ubiquitous descriptor in discourses of software design,

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The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 55, no. 2 (1997); Dominic Lopes, *A Philosophy of Computer Art* (New York;London;: Routledge, 2010); Dominic Preston, "Some Ontology of Interactive Art," *Philosophy & Technology* 27, no. 2 (2014); Aaron Smuts, "What Is Interactivity?," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 43, no. 4 (2009). Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

[117] Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 48-50.

[118] Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012), 4. To be fair, this is really an aside; interactivity is not Galloway's main focus in this context.

web development, information sciences, human-computer interaction studies, and the video game industry. If its connection to the digital is a myth, why does this myth remain so pervasive?

In trying to understand "interactivity," the work of Spiro Kiousis provides an efficient starting point because his frequently cited definition synthesizes nearly two dozen prior notions of "interactivity" from the fields of "psychology, sociology, and computer science/design." Kiousis ostensibly takes a literal, empirical approach to the notion of interactivity without being explicitly concerned with aesthetic experiences.[119] While Kiousis never mentions video games, his definition is focused on interactivity occurring through a mediating object (as opposed to "face-to-face interaction"), and, as such, its provisions could apply to video games. The following excerpt provides Kiousis' proposed definition, supplemented with clarifying examples from elsewhere in his article:

> *Interactivity can be defined as the degree to which a communication technology [e.g. "anything from a telephone to a computer system"] can create a mediated environment [e.g. "anything from a telephone wire to virtual reality"] in which participants [i.e. "human" and/or "machine"] can communicate (one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many), both synchronously and asynchronously, and participate in reciprocal message exchanges (third-order dependency). With regard to human users, it additionally refers to their ability to perceive the experience as a simulation of interpersonal communication and increase their awareness of telepresence.[120]*

Putting aside the second clause for the moment because it includes a rather significant qualification, there are number of observations to make here about Kiousis' definition of interactivity. For one thing, Kiousis refrains from implying that an object itself, what he calls a "communication

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[119] The closest Kiousis gets to considering aesthetic objects is his inclusion of Janet Murray, whose work *Hamlet on the Holodeck* has been an important touchstone within conversations about video games and virtual reality. Spiro Kiousis, "Interactivity: A Concept Explication," *New Media & Society* 4, no. 3 (2002): 365. Also see Oliver Quiring and Wolfgang Schweiger, "Interactivity: A Review of the Concept and a Framework for Analysis," *Communications* 33, no. 2 (2008). Another reason it seems applicable to thinking about video games is because the definition is also only focused on interactivity occurring through a mediating object (as opposed to "face-to-face interaction"), and, as such, its provisions are capable to be applied to aesthetic objects.

[120] For the sake of clarity, I am supplementing the quote with illustrative examples taken from elsewhere in his article Kiousis, "Interactivty," 372. To clarify, *"*synchronously" or "asynchronously" means that interactivity can occur both in real-time and over indefinite durations. By example, people talking over a telephone would be synchronous, but people leaving each other notes on a bulletin board would asynchronous.

technology," is being deemed interactive; instead interactivity is only considered as a measurable condition in the relationship that exists between participants through a specific communication technology. Still, it would perhaps be appropriate to describe a video game as being "interactive," if that video game enables interactivity. Another point is that "interactivity" clearly exists on a continuum for Kiousis, so a given object can be assessed in terms of providing a range of "interactivity" correlated to the relative sophistication of the communication afforded. At the same time, Kiousis' definition refrains from delineating a threshold where a particular object (or "communication technology") enables interactivity.

What is also worth noting is that many of Kiousis' empirical conditions are technically compatible with old media, such as film or literature. After all, nothing disqualifies paintings, books, and films from being considered "communication technologies." Further, Kiousis' notion that interactivity can occur *"asynchronously"* over indefinite durations—and not only *"synchronously,"* or in real-time—makes room for artworks that may be encoded with an expression that is received over an indefinite amount of time.

However, there is a crucial point where Manovich's "old" media interactivity ostensibly clashes with Kiousis' criteria of interactivity; and that is in regard to the issue of "reciprocal message exchanges/third order dependency," or what could be understood as successive acknowledgments of previous messages in subsequent messages.[121] In Kiousis' conception, interactivity requires a back-and-forth communication exchange, and this relationship must be dynamic, not merely reflexive—each response must reckon with the previous message, ensuring some sense of continuity and progression in the exchange. When applying this condition to Manovich's reception-based

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[121] Robert P. Hawkins, John M. Wiemann, and Suzanne Pingree, "Sage Annual Review of Communication Research: Advancing Communication Science," in *Interactivity: From New Media to Communication*, ed. Sheizaf Rafaeli (Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE, 1988). "Third-order dependency refers to the extent to which messages respond to and/or implicate previous messages in an exchange, creating the possibility of meaningful dialogue." Oxford Bibliography.

interactivity, say, when a person encounters and interprets a modernist painting, this mutual

reciprocity is much harder to establish. The responsiveness seems to only be occurring one way as

only the receiver is capable of participating. And, even if we agree that when a person beholds a

painting, watches a film, or reads a novel, they are filling in gaps in the work—and thus responding

to the artwork—the static, traditional artwork does not, in turn, measurably respond in a way that

acknowledges the preceding input of the viewer or reader.

It would certainly seem, then, that *mutual reciprocity* is the express material design quality of

interactivity that differentiates video games as a categorically "new" medium, from those

"traditional" media, such as novels and films, on a material level. Video games would be interactive

because they solicit input from users through an interface (comprised of some combination of

visual, aural, and tactile cues), the player input is then processed through the programmed protocols,

and then the game expresses responsive feedback to that user input through the dynamic and

variable interface. Put another way, the video game prompts a player to press "x," the player presses

"x," and the avatar on screen jumps. This interface varies responsively, allowing it to ostensibly

communicate back to the player that it has received and accounted for the player's practical input

during its ongoing operation. Compared to a film, there is undeniable distinction. A film may rely on

someone to screen it, but does not react dynamically. If a spectator uses a DVD remote to fast

forward over the gory parts of *Pulp Fiction*, the *content* of these forms does not vary, it remains

oblivious to the user's action. Quite plainly films cannot communicate a variable response because

they are not materially designed with a programmable structure that allows them to react to the

beholder's input.[122]

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[122] This aligns with Preston's argument that "the best way to account for the properties of interactive artworks is for their display types to be parts of them, parts which are in turn displayed." Preston, "Some Ontology of Interactive Art," 277.

Still, Manovich, for one, would not find this material distinction to be all that important. For him, this material approach is too "literally" focused on the "physical interaction between a user and a media object," while neglecting the psychological realm of interaction.[123] In fact, Kiousis' definition might actually agree with Manovich in this regard because it contains a significant qualification in its second clause, one which recognizes the subject positions involved with determining interactivity between humans and objects. In the first clause, interactivity is presented as a measurable condition that can be deduced through empirical data and analysis. In the second clause, interactivity becomes highly subjective and dependent on individual determinations, on a given person's "ability to perceive the experience" as interactive.

Once interactivity is filtered through a tenuous realm of subjective perception, cognition, and comprehension, the material distinctions can be disregarded to some extent. Consider, for instance, the fallacy of empiricism when it comes to defining "communication technology," "its mediated environment," and the "participants." In Kiousis' example of a landline phone call between two people, the participants, and other components of the interaction are straightforward: a) the literal phone is the *communication technology*, b) the wires are the *mediated environment*, and c) the people conversing are the *participants*. However, imagine another phone call where one of the conversing persons is replaced by an automated voice menu. When we introduce a computer running a responsive software program designed to have a conversation with a human, we introduce a whole new set of complications. In addition to the phone, and the phone lines, an assessment now has to account for the computer running the automated program, the program's software, and so on. Kiousis argues that both people and objects ("machines") can be participants, so with whom or with what can we say person on the phone is communicating? When we introduce a computer running a software program, the second participant becomes a kind of imagined construct. We can

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[123] Manovich, *Language.*

still account for the person, the phone, and the phone lines, but concerning the second participant perhaps we need to account for the computer running the automated program, the program's software, the software's programmer, the computer's engineer, the logic designer, the voice actor who supplies the voice, etc.

The same set of issues arise when settling the terms of interactivity in the instance of a person playing a single-player video game. Some of the terms seem apparent—the player is a *participant* sending a message, accomplished, say, by pressing a computer key and moving the mouse; the computer hardware running the game constitutes the *communication technology* because it is the material medium that makes the communication possible; the video game's software provides the *mediated environment* allowing room for a range of messages. At the same time, we could say that the messages are themselves communicated primarily through changes in the interface, which provide visual and aural cues to both acknowledge the player's inputted messages and provide reciprocal prompts as messages back to the player. The underlying question is, however, with *whom*—or with *what*—is the video game player communicating? Who or what is the second participant responding to the player in this interaction? And does it matter if their messages communicated are all programmed ahead of time?

From players' perspectives, there are really several plausible accounts of their interlocuter while playing a single-player video game. In one version of the events, players might imagine that they are interacting with the video game itself, which would be understood as a complex and dynamic enough software program that the game is a kind of entity responding dynamically to the player's inputs. Along the same lines, and depending on the game, video game players could imagine that they are interacting with a fictional, non-playable character existing within the game's diegetic world. If the players have a more material conception of playing a video game, they might envisage

themselves interacting with the computer hardware, because it is that which processes the inputs

before computing and rendering responses using the software interface.

However, there is yet another plausible account of playing a single-player video game, one

which greatly challenges whether interactivity is really all that different in video games compared to

film. In this scenario, players imagine themselves essentially communicating with the figure of the

game designer akin to the literary author or film director in the capacity of an "author function." In

this formulation, the game designer is a discursive construct or "projection," which organizes the

player's reception of the game by imagining the game as a purposeful, creative articulation—an

authored expression. This apprehends the video game primarily through an aesthetic framework and the

video game becomes an interpretable text emanating from an originating, intentional sensibility. This

formulation, however, challenges the expectation for a literal third-order reciprocity. The game

designer is not literally responding, they have merely programmed a textual communication that

contains layers and hidden protocols.

Returning to Kiousis' definition of interactivity with this mind, helps explain the

considerable discrepancy between Kiousis' two clauses in his definition of interactivity. In the first

clause—"the degree to which a communication technology can create a mediated environment in

which participants can communicate…and participate in reciprocal message exchanges"—

interactivity is cast as a measurable material condition, a relationship that can be deduced through

analysis of definite data. In Kiousis' second clause however, interactivity becomes highly subjective

and dependent on an individual's subjective determination: "with regard to human users,

[interactivity] additionally refers to their ability to perceive the experience as a simulation of

interpersonal communication…" Once interactivity is filtered through the nebulous realm of

subjective perception and individual comprehension, the material conditions ostensibly lose their

objective authority. Interactivity becomes a moving target, a condition that must be historicized,

contextualized, and situated because of its dependency on heuristic norms and subjective processes

of interpretation. This is supported by Kiousis' ultimate conclusion that "interactivity is both a

media and psychological factor that varies across communication technologies, communication

contexts, and people's perceptions."[124] This notion of interactivity acknowledges that context

matters in judging a given object as "interactive."

If, however, interactivity is "both a media and psychological factor" how does one side

affect the other? Instead of fully giving up on the term interactivity, the rest of this chapter will

explore whether video games' material qualities justify rethinking what interactivity really entails in

the way video games are experienced. That is, do video games' material and responsive design

provide a variance of interactivity that justifies distinguishing video games in kind (and not just in

degree) from forms like film? As we will see, those who argue that that video games should be

distinguished, assume that video games' material form inherently provides a more empowered,

agentic receptive role.

Perhaps the best way to evaluate these ideas, though, is through a close reading of a

particular video game. Consequently, we will look closely at Davey Wreden's 2010 *The Stanley Parable*

because it is an example of a video game that puts tremendous amount of pressure on the

assumption that all video games are interactive and the folly of divining the qualities of the video

game experience through material form alone.

2.2   PLAYING WITH THE STANLEY PARABLE

In fairness, classifying *The Stanley Parable* as "video game" already provides a misleading set of

associations for those unfamiliar with trends in video game production over the past ten years. For

one thing, *The Stanley Parable* lacks the identifiable characteristics associated with popular mainstream

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[124] Kiousis, "Interactivty," abstract.

video games, such as a clear set of rules, easily definable objectives, a sense of competition, or a measurable notion of progress. Yet, there is also little doubt that *The Stanley Parable* is culturally identified as a video game, and, along with titles such as the meditative *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2008; 2012) and the critically acclaimed *Gone Home* (The Fulbright Company, 2013)*,* it falls into a category of independently produced, smaller-scale video games that use the first-person perspective while breaking from associated generic conventions of shooting or puzzles. Each of these games focuses almost entirely on producing and exploring a diegetic environment laden with embedded narrative. However, in contrast to the sincerity and melodrama that permeate the more self-serious storytelling found in *Dear Esther* and *Gone Home*, *The Stanley Parable's* narrative has a facetious, reflexive tone, as it takes a confrontational disposition in relation to the player.

To be clear, claiming that *The Stanley Parable* is a self-reflexive rumination on the video game form does not require a close or "redemptive" reading because it quite bluntly puts the issues of its form at the center of its content. A number of scholars have already read the game as a rumination of storytelling in video games including Bradley Fest who explains that "*The Stanley Parable* is the contemporary independent videogame avant-garde's most clear critical reflection on itself [and its] autocritique lays bare the medium and its conventions in what can often be unflattering ways, treating videogames with a merciless yet playful irony."[125] In *The Stanley Parable*, the player controls a character named Stanley after he finds himself suddenly aware that he seems to be alone in his usually bustling office building. The player controls Stanley as he explores his office and, depending on the path the player chooses, the narrative will cascade in one of several absurd directions. All the while, the game provides reflexive commentary about non-linear storytelling and the experience of

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[125] Bradley J Fest, "Metaproceduralism: The Stanley Parable and the Legacies of Postmodern Metafiction," *Wide Screen* 6, no. 1 (2016). Other scholarly work on the Stanley Parable focusing on how it disrupts narrative conventions of video games see Lars AWJ de Wildt, "Precarious Play: To Be or Not to Be Stanley," *Press Start* 1, no. 1 (2014); Souvik Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books* (Springer, 2015); Astrid Ensslin, "Video Games as Unnatural Narratives," *Diversity of Play* (2015); Michael James Heron and Pauline Helen Belford, "All of Your Co-Workers Are Gone: Story, Substance, and the Empathic Puzzler," *Journal of Games Criticism* 2, no. 1 (2015).

playing video games. This is even made clear before the game's narrative officially begins, when the unusual interface of the games' "menu screen" announces the game's intention to disrupt the player's conventional experience of first-person video games. Usually a video game menu screen is the equivalent of a book's table of contents or a DVD menu selection screen. It is an element of practical design used only to facilitate access to the content itself. The status of *The Stanley Parable's* menu, however, is different (and perhaps more akin to a title sequence in a film). When the program is first loaded, the selection menu depicts a computer at a desk displaying a duplicate of the menu screen it is contained within, producing an endless recursion in which the renderings get exponentially smaller until they are unrecognizable—or unrenderable—in a manner similar to a live-feed video camera pointed at a screen rendering its image (Figure 0-B2.2-A).

Figure 2.2-A. Menu Screen for *The Stanley Parable.*

When the player moves the cursor with the mouse in this menu, each cursor on the successive screens moves along concurrently, producing a peculiar feeling for the player of staring at, and controlling, both a real-world computer screen and a representation of a computer screen simultaneously. Perhaps the implication is that the game *"The Stanley Parable"* also exists within the diegetic world of the game. Alternatively, maybe the player's world should be considered to exist within the diegetic framework of the game. Either way, the menu screen begins the game's extended effort to make the player hyper-aware of the formal frames that position the player in relation to the game's world. This accords with the seemingly non-diegetic text on screen stating that "You are playing *THE STANLEY PARABLE*," indicating that the experience of playing *The Stanley Parable,* has commenced prior to the player selecting the option to "Begin the game."

Given an even more scrupulous analysis—one that perhaps already engages with this decidedly functional menu design as an element of an aesthetically interpretable text—the layers of *The Stanley Parable*'s rumination on the video game form are even more multifaceted. Even the seemingly unremarkable framed landscape wall-art hanging in the upper right corner of the menu screen provides an outlet for demonstrating how the video game's text is subject to one's critical disposition. What should or could we say is the *function* of this diegetic artwork? The number of issues raised by this landscape art alone is quite astounding to contemplate. Among other possible interpretations is that the detail is at once 1) an instance of plausible detail adding a sense of realism to an office environment; 2) a suggestive foreshadowing of the game's obsession with narrative frames, here providing a literal representation of multiple "frames" within frames; 3) a comment on the functional utility of popular art, which here provides a faux-window onto the outside world for both the diegetic worker—not unlike how a video game is associated with popular art and can simulate visions of natural environments; 4) a somewhat oblique reference to the similar-looking iconic Microsoft Windows XP background scene known as "Bliss"—an observation that provides

both an associative pun to "windows" and a nod in the direction of the millions of office workers forced to deal with "Bliss"; 4) a specific predictive reference to one of the game's many possible narrative "endings," specifically the "happy ending" in which Stanley escapes the office and arrives in a similar pastoral setting; 5) a fictional representation of artwork, which is ambiguously either a diegetic painting or a photograph. Still, what makes *The Stanley Parable* exceptional as a video game is not merely that a humanities scholar could conduct various credible critical readings of it, but that, as we shall see, *The Stanley Parable* explicitly compels the player to contemplate what the game means, that is, to interpret it as a we would any authored, aesthetic objects.

After selecting "Begin the game" in the menu, *The Stanley Parable* opens with an introductory cinematic sequence, or what is also known to players as a "cut-scene," which provides background exposition through spoken narration. The voice of an omniscient narrator—complete with the authority mustered from a stodgy masculine British accent—begins with the line, "this is the story of a man named Stanley…" while the virtual camera tracks in through a generic office towards the door of one particular office. Over a montage mostly consisting of Stanley working at his computer, the narrator explains that Stanley was a happy office drone in a big company whose only job was to push buttons on his computer as commanded, until, one day, the orders stopped coming in and he found himself suddenly alone in the office. The player's control picks up with Stanley facing his computer as the narrator's voice fades out. It is the at next moment, however, that that the game introduces the player to its central reflexive device, the voiceover narration.

Once leaving Stanley's office and entering the adjacent room filled with empty cubicles and adjoined offices, the omniscient narrator from the opening cinematic sequence makes a surprising return: "All of his co-workers were gone. What could it mean? Stanley decided to go to the meeting room, perhaps he had simply missed a memo." There are a few reasons that this use of voiceover narration violates norms in video games, ones that are worth examining in further detail. As in

fictional films, a non-diegetic third-person, voiceover narration can be a helpful expository shortcut in video games for setting a scene (like the text crawls in the opening of *Star Wars*) or moving from to location to another. Yet, also as in fictional film, the use of this type of narration is usually relegated to the "framing narration," interstitial moments between levels or sequences.[126] In addition to violating the framing norm, *The Stanley Parable's* voiceover narration also demonstrates access to Stanley's interiority, which provides a level of omniscience not usually found in visual storytelling media. As Sarah Kozloff points out, "[third-person, voiceover] film narrator[s are] perfectly capable of telling us what characters are thinking, yet such 'inside views' seldom occur." Relying on an omniscient third-person narrator to explain what characters are thinking would likely come across as painfully unsubtle and overly didactic, which is why films generally try to communicate this information in more subtle, diegetic, and motivated ways, such as through acting or perhaps even first-person voiceover narration.[127]

  As a video game, *The Stanley Parable's* use of voiceover narration also undermines the perception that players are supposed to be taking on the role of Stanley while playing. In this moment, however, the narrator is not describing what they are thinking and Stanley's knowledge of "the meeting room" is a moment when players confronts the incongruity of Stanley's foreknowledge and their own. Consequently, retaining the third-person perspective and referring to Stanley's thoughts, serves only to make players aware that, while they are in control of Stanley's actions and decisions to some degree, they are not in control of the character's thoughts. Their role is limited by the design of the game.

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[126] The notion of a "framing" storyteller comes from Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1980). The observation about film is made by Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-over Narration in American Fiction Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 71-5.

[127] Kozloff, *Inivisible*, 81. Because it is in the ocular first-person perspective, *The Stanley Parable* it can be a challenge to express Stanley's interiority at a given moment. However, video games and films have certainly come up with creative workarounds to this. Perhaps, steering the view to focus on an object, or having an object glow, or including first-person voiceover narration or having a non-playable character reacting.

In fact, playing *The Stanley Parable* mostly consists of the dynamic stemming from the incongruity between the narrator's descriptions and what the player chooses to do with Stanley. The key illustration of this occurs when Stanley reaches the first fork in his path, a hallway that leads to two open doors. Before the player can decide which door to open, the narrator's dialogue seems to become out-of-sync with the concurrent events: "When Stanley came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left." The continued use of past-tense narration, along with the narrator's air of confidence, faces the player with a conundrum. If the player chooses to move Stanley through the door on the left, the narrator's statement is true and the narration served as instruction from a reliable narrator. If the player chooses instead to enter the door on the right, defying the narrator's previous statement, the player has rendered the narrator into an unreliable narrator, seemingly violating the game's plan.

From this initial decision point forward, the game presents the player with a cascading series of decisions—almost always regarding the voiceover narrator's instructions to Stanley—which continue until the player reaches an end to a narrative branch. Most of these endings entail direct confrontations between the player/Stanley and the voiceover narrator who frequently violates formal divisions by seeming to either directly address the player and/or the character of Stanley. In one ending, for example, the narrator triggers a time bomb designed to inevitably explode regardless of the actions taken by Stanley in the game, and the narrator proceeds to mock Stanley and the players for their inability to stop the bomb. In another ending, Stanley is forced to choose between either essentially watching an endless laser show or committing suicide by jumping to his death. All the while the narrator makes it clear that the act of committing suicide will be taken as horribly cynical criticism of the both the narrator and the larger game. In yet another path, Stanley is asked to give his feedback on what is presented as the narrator's own prototype video game, a pretentious and simple game "all about the desperation and tedium of endlessly confronting the demands of

family life." Perhaps the best way to understand *The Stanley Parable's* branching structure is through a

fan-created flowchart that maps out the forking paths in a manner that may recall the (fig 3):
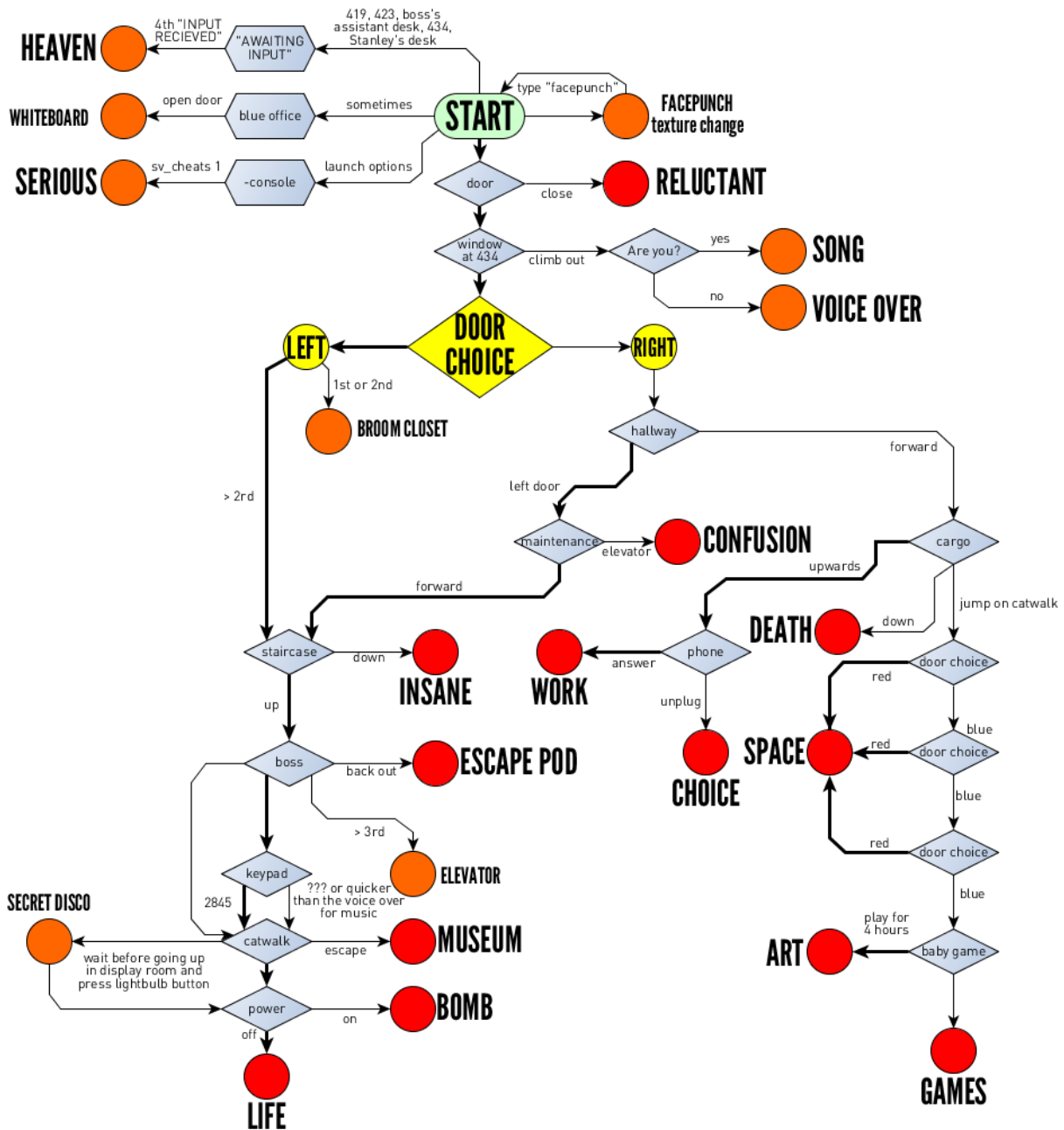
Figure 2.2-B. A fan-made chart mapping out *The Stanley Parable's* narrative branches.

Each "ending" (shown here in red) is a point of no return, in which the player has guided Stanley

through enough in-game decisions to trigger a certain sequence of narrative events that culminate in

a forced cut to a loading screen, before the game appears to start over from the beginning of the

narrative as the player rejoins Stanley from the point when he initially leaves his office. After each ending, the loading screen itself is lined with the seemingly infinite Mobius-strip of a statement "…the end is never the end is never…" In fact, *The Stanley Parable* is meant to be replayed, so that player can make different choices and explore other possible outcomes. If, on an initial playthrough, the player travels through the first left door as instructed by the narrator, then the right door becomes a tantalizing option for the next playthrough, etc. Each decision point becomes marked as a moment that players should return to on another playthrough, so they find out what occurs when the alternate decision is made.

In a certain sense, the flowchart illustrating *The Stanley Parable's* branching structure epitomizes key aspects of the variable, responsive material structure of the video game form in general. Each node containing multiple extensions designates a point when the game's interface prompts the player to make a clear decision and input instructions, choosing a path for Stanley so that the game can continue to operate and express its content. Though this flowchart only maps out narrative events, such as Fry's visualization of *Pac-Man* (Figure 2.1-A, p.*82*), it displays the variant expressive potentials embedded within the single video game object. In theory, this chart illustrates the argument that video games—and similar digital forms—engender an exceptional amount of agency in the act of reception. Among these scholars, George Landow argues that hypertextual, variable forms, including video games, "create an active, even intrusive reader…[who] infringes on the power of the writer, removing some of it and granting it to the reader." Jay Bolter similarly explains that when "the reader performs the text,… [this] define[s] new levels of creativity that fall between the apparent originality of the romantic artist and apparent passivity of the traditional

reader." [128] Regardless of whether "interactivity" describes this variable responsive structure, these scholars agree that video game's material form enables players to operate as collaborative agents over the textual expression.

And yet, as we shall soon see, *The Stanley Parable* plainly rejects the premise that its form in any way provides meaningful textual agency. It compels us to contemplate whether the variability and responsive structural configuration of video games translates into something that is experienced as a dynamic interaction. At the same time, the game also undermines the assumption that its variability and responsiveness produce a receptive experience that is altogether different from one that can be found in a non-variable medium like film. To understand this, though, we need to articulate how *The Stanley Parable* provides a somewhat radical notion of what constitutes the video game as a textual experience.

2.2.1 The Video Game Experience and Textual Agency

One reason it is tempting to agree with the argument that video games provide distinct aesthetic experiences because of their material differences is because this position seems to offer something of a compromise between the material and aesthetic approaches to video games. At once, video games can be apprehended as aesthetic objects, in that they are understood as interpretable texts, and yet they are also distinct kinds of aesthetic experiences because of their variable and responsive material design, which produces a new form of aesthetic engagement. This is, essentially, why Aarseth's concept of "ergodic literature"— what he also calls "cybertexts"—has been so influential in video game scholarship because, for Aarseth, video games are different in kind because they are

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[128] Bolter, *Writing Space*, 2nd, 173. George P. Landow, *Hypertext 3.0 : Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization*, 3rd ed., Parallax (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 125,36]. Also see Stuart Moulthrop, "Rhizome and Resistance: Hypertext and the Dreams of a New Culture," *Hyper/text/theory* (1994).

"machine[s] for the production of variety of expression." Not unlike the arguments from Landow and Bolter, that a new material form engenders a new type of agency, Aarseth's argues that the "mechanical organization of the text fundamentally changes how the text is beheld." The materially variable and responsive structure of this category of works engenders a type of collaborative reception that firmly surpasses the "psychological" participation that Manovich envisions as implicit to all aesthetic reception. When the "user" provides input into a cybertext, "the user will have effectuated a semiotic sequence, [a] selective movement [which] is a work of physical construction." This literal and material effectuation is tangible and quantifiable—something Aarseth calls "extranoematic"—that is absent in the way film or literature is perceived.

For Aarseth, being a "construction of a different kind," is felt in the act of reception:

> *A reader, however strongly engaged in the unfolding of a narrative, is powerless. Like a spectator at a soccer game, he may speculate, conjecture, extrapolate, even shout abuse, but he is not a player. Like a passenger on a train, he can study and interpret the shifting landscape, he may rest his eyes wherever he pleases, even release the emergency brake and step off, but he is not free to move the tracks in a different direction. He cannot have the player's pleasure of influence: "Let's see what happens when I do this." The reader's pleasure is the pleasure of the voyeur. Safe, but impotent.*
>
> *The cybertext reader, on the other hand, is not safe, and therefore, it can be argued, she is not a reader. The cybertext puts its would-be reader at risk: the risk of rejection. The effort and energy demanded by the cybertext of its reader raise the stakes of interpretation to those of intervention. Trying to know a cybertext is an investment of personal improvisation that can result in either intimacy or failure. …The tensions at work in a cybertext, while not incompatible with those of narrative desire, are also something more: a struggle not merely for interpretative insight but also for narrative control: 'I want this text to tell my story; the story that could not be without me.'* [129]

The variable structural design of the form engenders a new type of agentic reception, something closer to collaboration.[130] Like Landow, Aarseth puts it in terms of power relations as the video game player is imbued with a kind of authority not only over the interpretation of the text, but over the compositional expression of the initial text itself.

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[129] Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 3-10.
[130] See ibid., 79-81.

What makes *The Stanley Parable* such a provocative and productive video game to read in relation to this idea is that it resoundingly strips that power away from the player, making the argument that the receptive agency provided by video games probably never existed to begin with.

To commence explaining *The Stanley Parable's* conception of video games, we might begin with the branch of the game that goes into effect once the player follows each of the narrator's directions from start to finish. (In other words, when the narrator says the line "Stanley leaves his office," the player then moves Stanley out of the office; when the narrator says the line "Stanley entered the door on his left," the player moves Stanley through the door on the left, etc.) In the ending sequence triggered upon following this path, Stanley ultimately escapes his office complex and is let out into a pastoral scene (reminiscent of the cliché landscape painting found in Stanley's office in the opening moments of the game). In this supposedly ideal conclusion to the game's narrative, the player has enabled Stanley to escape the vague looming threat in the office, and set Stanley free. The voiceover narrator explains:

> *Was it over? [Pause] Yes! [Stanley] had won! He had defeated the machine, unshackled himself from someone else's command, freedom was mere moments away. And yet, even as the immense door slowly opened, Stanley reflected on how many puzzles still lay unsolved. Where had his co-workers gone? How had he been freed from the machine's grasp? What other mysteries did this strange building hold?*

In Aarseth's understanding, in reaching this ending, the player has collaborated in the production of the text's composition, and the player should accordingly feel empowered that the text expressed their individual story. Yet, reaching this ending provides precisely the opposite sense. The player has "won," "earned freedom" and "defeated the machine" by exactly following the voiceover narrator's every instruction. The word "command" is especially poignant here because it is usually the computer program that responds to "commands." Has the player "escaped someone else's command" by being commanded by the program in the form of the narrator? In choosing to obey

the commands made by the game, the player has effectively merely turned the pages or flipped the tape as instructed.

In Aarseth's conception of the ergodic cybertext, picking a specific path from among the others is an act of composition and "effectuating the text." However, reaching this, or any other "ending" in *The Stanley Parable*, lacks narrative denouement and the sense that the "text" is in any way complete. Upon reaching this sequence—which, it should be mentioned, takes less than ten minutes—the narrator poses certain rhetorical questions that make us aware that we have only encountered a very narrow sliver of what actually comprises the game's actual textual form. Those unanswered questions are for the moment unsettled; their answers remain buried elsewhere in the game's variable form. The narrator refers to the remaining "puzzles" and "mysteries," implicitly acknowledging its affiliation with ludic and narrative traditions. In doing so, *The Stanley Parable* recognizes how the material structure must be understood as both variable and finite. The ludic elements of *The Stanley Parable* promise a material design that depends on a user to functionally exist. The narrative elements remind us that this is a story that has been written ahead of time, one that can be uncovered, but not created anew. What *The Stanley Parable* implies, alternatively, is that the video game's text is not simply the version perceived on a given encounter; rather, the text is the sum of multiple encounters, and even the potential for other encounters. This conception counters the assumption that choosing a single path—and apparently ending the game—in any way provides the player with any sense of agency over the textual form. This fundamentally pushes back against the assumption that encountering the ending signifies the conclusion of the text, and it also undermines the supposed agency that the player wields as a supposed collaborator.

Another particularly telling sequence demonstrates precisely how insignificant the player's actions are in the collaborative effectuation of the textual expression. In this sequence, the player must take Stanley off the prescribed path to essentially lock Stanley in a broom closet. In this

iteration, the player will direct Stanley to follow the path prescribed by the narrator until the point

that the player spots an office door marked with the words "Broom Closet." The player will click the

command to open the door (unlike most doors, this one opens) to reveal a fairly unremarkable

depiction of a broom closet. The player can have Stanley move inside the closet and then close the

door, but, once inside, the player can only look around at the non-actionable props (some cleaning

supplies). After a moment, the narrator comments on the decision of the player by shifting the

spoken narration accordingly:

> *Stanley stepped into the broom closet, but there was nothing here, so he turned around and got back on track. [Pause.] There was nothing here, no choice to make, no path to follow, just an empty broom closet. No reason to still be here. [Pause]…You do realize there's no choice or anything in here, right? If I had said "Stanley walked past the broom closet" at least you would have had a reason for exploring it to find out. But it didn't even occur to me because literally this closet is of absolutely no significance to the story whatsoever. I never would have thought to mention it. [Pause] …Maybe to you this is somehow its own branching path. Maybe when you go talk about this with your friends you'll say "oh, did you get the broom closet ending? The broom closet ending was my favorite!" I hope your friends find this concerning… [Pause]Well, I've come to a very definite conclusion about what's going on right now. You're dead. You got to this broom closet, explored it a bit, and were just about to leave because there's nothing here when a physical malady of some sort shut down your central nervous system and you collapsed on the keyboard. Well in a situation like this, the responsible thing is to alert someone nearby so as to ensure that your body is taken care of before it begins to decompose. [Yelling:] HELLO!! ANYONE WHO HAPPENS TO BE NEARBY!! THE PERSON AT THIS COMPUTER IS DEAD!! HE OR SHE HAS FALLEN PREY TO ANY NUMBER OF YOUR COUNTLESS HUMAN PHYSIOLOGICAL VULNERABILITIES. IT'S INDICATIVE OF THE LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY OF YOUR SPECIES. PLEASE REMOVE THEIR CORPSE FROM THE AREA AND INSTRUCT ANOTHER HUMAN TO TAKE THEIR PLACE AT THE COMPUTER, MAKING SURE THEY UNDERSTAND BASIC FIRST-PERSON VIDEO GAME MECHANICS, AND FILLING THEM IN ON THE HISTORY OF NARRATIVE TROPES IN VIDEO GAMING SO THAT THE IRONY AND INSIGHTFUL COMMENTARY OF THIS GAME IS NOT LOST ON THEM…*

Each "pause" represents a temporary cessation of the dialogue in which the player must remain in

the broom closet doing nothing, and at each of these moments the player is unsure whether or not

there is additional scripted dialogue coming so a major component of this sequence is the player's

curiosity, waiting to see how far the script continues in this direction. It is essentially a game of chicken where the game is challenging the player to continue to do nothing and the player is curious to find out how far the game's design stretches this narration in a sequence in which apparently nothing is happening. All the while the narrator mocks the player for being unable to take a more active role to change the narrative. For the player, this act of disobedience, this cessation of activity is essentially a choice, which, in theory, is a moment of collaboration in the textual expression. By choosing not to move Stanley out of the broom closet, the player is deciding to be a "passive" spectator, thus triggering, this iteration of the text.

Yet there is another way of analyzing this scene—one *The Stanley Parable* reveals and advocates for—which challenges Aarseth's understanding of the player's sense of meaningful collaboration. For the player, there is a something of a paradox in this moment, one that leads to both triumph and humiliation. While players have seemingly composed this particular sequence through their patience, they are also confronted by the fact that their literal, material input is irrelevant. The game's narration has successfully guided the player into making the decisions required to compose this moment. To have even accessed this sequence, the player inevitably followed out a path scripted ahead of time. The feeling of individuality and autonomy must be coupled with the realization that the player has been previously scripted into the boundaries of larger text. The dialogue perhaps even invites us to consider a scenario in which the narrator's hypothesis is correct—imagine that players have been incapacitated to the extent that they are unable to move Stanley out of the broom closet. The dialogue, the entire sequence of events, exists whether or not the it was the player's choice to keep Stanley in the closet. The process of this expression is indifferent to the player's supposed agency. The player is instead exposed as inconsequential to the variant compositions embedded within the material structure, which while variable, is hardcoded to provide a stable experience regardless of the input. If meaningful collaboration or effectuation

requires the player's agentic participation, the game is exposing how inconsequential the player's role is in the production of what effectively is perceived as the interpretable text.

In playing *The Stanley Parable*, it quickly becomes apparent to the player that transgression *is* the game. What initially feels like a rebellious act, is rendered into a tacit obedience. From this perspective, the only way the player can collaborate or express narrative agency would be to affect the composition in a manner that was not sanctioned ahead of time by the game's design. The effort to escape the prescriptive protocols and express agency outside the games rules manifests in a search for weaknesses in the game's authority. One sequence that illustrates the game's shrewd cognizance of this occurs if the player, without any prompting or instruction from the narrator, laboriously maneuvers Stanley across the top of a few desks and cubicles walls, to essentially jump out of an open window. It seems that what the player has discovered is a structural flaw in the way this space was composed, which left an environmental loophole in the level design. The apparent flaw in the level's careful environmental architecture provides a gap and now Stanley falls out the window into an empty, white space seemingly devoid of visual design. For the moment, it seems the player has succeeded in escaping the parameters of the game—not merely uncovering what was meant to be uncovered, but actually inventing a new composition by exploiting a glitch and inhabiting a space devoid of the designer's intentionality and control.[131]

In theory, this would constitute a moment of genuine textual effectuation, but, being *The Stanley Parable,* this event too is soon revealed to be carefully orchestrated. After a few seconds, the narrator's voice suddenly chimes in: "At first Stanley assumed he had broken the map, until he heard this narration and realized it was a part of the game's design all along. He then praised the game for its insightful and witty commentary into the nature of video game structure and its examination of

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[131] We will discuss glitches and exploits in more detail in the next chapter. That is, many games, even carefully crafted games, are so immense that they include accidental gaps in design that might result in walls that a player can inadvertently pass through, falling outside a game's architecture and into a liminal, undesigned space.

structural narrative tropes." As the narrator points out, knowing gaming culture description of a significant environmental design glitch ("breaking the map"), the player's probable assumption that they had expressed agency by exceeding the game's parameters was an elaborate ruse designed into the game. The implication is that every idea, instinct, or strategy the player develops has already been anticipated by the game's designer. The larger text has carefully calculated the range of possibilities for the player's experience.

As the scene continues, the game essentially ridicules the notion that exploration and limited choices afford agency and allow meaningful collaboration in the production of the text. While in the empty space out the window, the narrator asks players to signal if they have grown tired of the space by moving one way or another. If players express that they are not tired of this scenario, the narrator resumes his lesson:

> *Ah, then in that case we'll continue! But now here comes the real question: what do you think would have happened if you had told me that you wanted this to stop? Do you think it would have been particularly different? Would I have taken this same idea but rephrased it superficially to fit that answer? Perhaps you never would even have thought of it if I hadn't brought up the issue in the first place! Oh, now think about it, will it be worth it for you to restart, and then come BACK here, just to do the other option? Clearly this whole gag takes some time, what if the other option is even longer! How long will you spend in total just to have heard all the narration! Or – oh this is rich! - perhaps you've just played the other option and now you've come to see what happens in this one! So what do you think, which choice was the better one? Imagine if you had selected 'continue' on your first playthrough, how tantalizing it would be, not knowing what happens when you pick the other option…*

There are several discerning observations about the player's orientation toward the game implicit in this scene. For one thing, the game acknowledges Aarseth's pivotal idea that within this form each decision does carry the "risk of rejection." Here the narrator essentially taunts the player's investment in the time spent getting to this point. At the same time, players are also being taunted because of their compulsion to keep playing to satisfy their curiosity. In this way, *The Stanley Parable* acknowledges the player's drive to uncover the magnitude of the predesigned text. The player's chief recourse in the face of this decision is repetition—essentially conducting the experiment again to

encounter the path not taken. At the same time, the game admits that it is unaware if this occasion *is* the repetition because, as it has been pre-written, it is utterly indifferent to the choices made. The sense of responsiveness is revealed to be another illusion built into the text. The stakes are also lowered because it seems there are no real consequences in a variable responsive narrative scenario that can be easily reconstituted and re-rerun. As in most video games, finding out the results of the decision not taken, requires playing the game again, or perhaps, saving the game right before a decision is made and reloading the scenario to see the other path.[132]

In fact, this idea is essentially the unifying lesson in almost every path the player chooses for Stanley. Each time players feel like they are making a choice, the game in turn provides a sardonic, exaggerated reaction mocking the idea that the player's input managed to fundamentally alter the game's expression. In one ending, the voice of a second voiceover narrator, this time a female, ostensibly freezes the diegetic world as yet another embodiment of the *deus ex machina*. Here she casts the relationship between Stanley and the primary narrator as a plain analogy of the player's futile attempt to express any meaningful agency in the face of the carefully programmed parameters built into the game's design:

> *"When every path you can walk has been created for you long in advance, death becomes meaningless, making life the same. Do you see now? Do you see that Stanley was already dead from the moment he hit start?...But listen to me, you can still save these two, you can stop the program before they both fail. Push escape and press 'quit,' there's no other way to*

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[132] Indeed, game developers are aware that the stakes of decisions are decreased when the experiment can easily be rerun and a decision can be reversed. This has led to a number of innovations in game design trying to thwart the repeatability of scenarios. Some games, like *BioShock* (2k Games, 2007), will disable the saving function at a point when it seems a consequential decision must be made. Other games, like, *Mass Effect*, will cascade decisions so that each scenario relies on a series of previous decisions. This relies on the fact that sane players would not possibly have the time to replay the game enough to reconstitute each branch. Other games have devised ways to ensure that some decisions do carry relatively permanent consequences. *Undertale* (Toby Fox, 2015), for instance, will acknowledge the player's actions on a previous playthrough making one's past, seemingly inescapable. Additionally, rogue-like games are defined by a combination of the inability to repeat a scenario because death cannot be undone, and procedurally generated elements that ensure infinite scenarios that, in theory, cannot be reencountered. At the same time, all of these efforts are, to some extent, thwarted by the propensity for video game players to share their experiences in the aggregate. If you wanted to see what happened if you made a different decision, just find the YouTube video of the person who made the other decision or find a wiki in which players have mapped out the different scenarios.

> *beat this game. As long as you move forward you'll be walking someone else's path, stop now and it will be your only true choice."*

Quite explicitly, *The Stanley Parable* resists the notion that the player has any real agency. The argument the game seems to be making is that the player's role remains decidedly inconsequential to what should be understood as the video game's true text expression. The player's "choices" are circumscribed within the larger textual expression of the game.

One reason *The Stanley Parable's* deterministic standpoint is important is because it challenges the conventional wisdom concerning a video's game's "text" proposed by a number of influential new media scholars. Aarseth's concept of ergodic literature, for one, considers a video game's "text" that which is essentially constituted and expressed during a given playthrough. We find a comparable idea in from Nick Montfort's materialist-centric approach to interactive fiction, which "present[s] different texts to be read depending upon the actions of the reader."[133] Similarly, Bolter's logic concerning hypertexts implies that players' power to alter the textual "sequence" of the video game means they are altering something fundamental about the text itself.[134] However, one of the central premises of *The Stanley Parable* is that its form is not ascertained through an individual iteration—by what occurred on a single play-through—because its text is comprised of the entire system of protocols and all potential iterations. Each branch of the decision tree remains a primary part of the text even when it is not expressed, and the "paths not taken," which Aarseth sees as empowering for the player because they imply investment and ownership, instead remind the player how their role is

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[133] Nick Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), vii. Montfort calls a transcript of a given encounter an "interaction text," essentially a recording that documents the interaction. The presumption is that in interactive fiction, the reader is provided with a set of options and the text itself responds to the how the reader deals with these options. In interactive fiction, a reader could, say, prompt the text for additional description and this action changes the actual text. Ibid., 16.   We might also add Kirschenbaum to this list.
[134] Jay David Bolter makes a version of this point in regards to books where "the text [is] a sequence of words on the page entirely determined by authors and printers." The implication is that with "hypertexts," a category that could also include video games, the sequence of the "text" is in part determined by readers/players. Bolter, *Writing Space*, 2nd, 174.

somewhat inconsequential in relation to the larger textual form. The player's choices and the path taken are already carefully inscribed into the text.

In *The Stanley Parable*, what appears at first to be the player's agency in a collaborative textual expression, is really an indication that considerable parts of the primary text remain concealed. In a sense, then, it is the player—and not the computer program—who is required to be responsive and variable. The video game as a text remains fundamentally unchanged while the player is compelled to keep testing out different inputs through processes of repetition with variation in an effort to disclose the hidden chambers of expression. From this perspective, *The Stanley Parable* undermines experimentation, all in the effort to implicitly uncover protocols underlying the textual form.

2.2.2 The Narrational Role of the Player and the Spectator

While *The Stanley Parable* undermines the causal link between a responsive, variable form and the player's feelings of narrative agency, the game does not discount the idea that video games provide a distinct receptive experience compared to what a film can provide. Put another way, perhaps Aarseth and others have exaggerated the video game player's assured collaborative role in the narrative, but it still seems plausible that video games provide an aesthetic experience that is different in *kind*, rather than merely *degree*. If this is indeed the case, what role can we say a player has in video games that seems different from a film spectator?

At a minimum, we should reckon with the fact that video game players interpose in the video game's expression in a manner that finds no equivalent dynamic in traditional film spectatorship.[135] Pressing play on a remote control to watch a movie—or, even a more diachronic and cooperative act like hand-cranking a Mutoscope to produce moving images in a flipbooks—may

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[135] The "traditional" qualifier here is because of 360-degree and VR films. For more thoughts on this, see later footnote 137 from this chapter.

enable a film's expression, but playing a video game not only enables the video game's expression, it also seemingly alters the composition and content being expressed. Further still, video games plainly register measurable feedback based on the player's actions in a way that traditional films do not. That is, when players input a command through a keyboard or controller, this input is then articulated visually or audibly within the video game's expression. Even a reflexive (and somewhat defensive) example like *The Stanley Parable* implicitly illustrates this measurable distinction.

The question is, however, do these distinctions provide enough justification to critically understand the video game experience as categorically different from the film experience? Are these experiences in any way comparable? If so, what insight can comparisons between these media provide? One way to further consider these questions is to recall that *The Stanley Parable* essentially begins with what can be considered a cinematic sequence before transitioning into a first-person video game where the player makes decisions. And, looking closely at the precise moment when *The Stanley Parable* ostensibly hands control over to the player is a way of examining the distinctions between cinematic spectatorship and video game playing.

The Stanley Parable's opening cinematic sequence, which provides the backstory, might simply be thought of as a short opening film, or more precisely either an example of digital animation or machinima. Regardless, it is decidedly not something that can be "played" in the manner of a video game because the player's input does not change what appears on screen, and the player is instead asked to watch. The sequence is also edited together in conventional filmic style. The opening shot (Figure 2.2-C) tracks in through an office space towards a private office door reading "427," while jaunty non-diegetic music plays, and the voiceover narrator begins: "This is the story of a man named Stanley. Stanley worked for a company in a big building where he was employee # 427...". As the perspective reaches the door, the sequence cuts to what is presumably the inside of office 427 (Figure 2.2-D), and we get the first shot of Stanley through a long barrier shot peering at him from

directly behind. While the perspective tracks in, Stanley sits at his desk working, lit as if by a

spotlight. Before the perspective gets too close to Stanley's back, however, it cuts to a faux-

surveillance perspective (Figure 2.2-E) signaled in part through a grainy, extreme high-angle, which

zooms in and out to reframe Stanley. During this shot the narrator explains Stanley's job: "orders

came to him through a monitor on his, telling him what buttons to push, how long to push them,

and in what order."

Figure 2.2-C Tracking in to Stanley's office door.

Figure 2.2-D. Stanley working.

Figure 2.2-E. Surveillance shot of Stanley working.

The sheer formal mundanity of these first few shots illustrates how even this quirky video game relies on conventional cinematic storytelling in this opening sequence. The shots are motivated and reflect the narrator's dialogue—the perspective tracks in as the narrator introduces the world, it tracks in further as he introduces the character, and it cuts to a surveillance-like shot as he explains Stanley's mysterious job and orders. Even the seemingly incongruous surveillance shot is familiar film and televisual trope for implicitly communicating the sense that this character is being observed by some mysterious presence within the diegesis.

On the other hand, *The Stanley Parable's* cinematic sequence delivers subtle but edifying departures from typical conventions for cinematic sequences in comparable narrative, first-person video games. Aside from providing a much more banal scenario then one might expect for a video game, the most radical formal strategy in *The Stanley Parable's* cut-scene is how it establishes Stanley as a character who exists separate and apart from the player. This positions the player into a particularly distanced spectatorial perspective, especially when compared to canonical first-person games such as *Halo: Combat Evolved* (2001), *Half-Life 2* (2004), and *Bioshock* (2007), and more

independent, nontraditional counterparts such as *Gone Home* or *Dear Esther*. Each of these games

begins with opening cinematic sequences—in the sense that players are not immediately granted any

control over a moving image—but of these, only *Halo* spends any time outside the first-person

perspective. Like *The Stanley Parable*, *Halo* provides an extended, edited sequence with multiple angles

and shots, however, *Halo* works to minimize distance between the player and the player's avatar,

providing only a quick glimpse of the avatar's armored suit (fig 7) before the scene immediately cuts

to the first-person perspective and the moment where the player takes control (fig 8). If thought

about in terms of standard cinematic point-of-view setup using a shot/reverse-shot structure, after

cutting to the point-of-view in reverse-shot, the perspective remains in this view for the duration of

the scene/level.

Figure 2.2-F. From *Halo's* opening cinematic, showing Master Chief, players' soon-to-be avatar.

Figure 2.2-G. The following shot, as the player takes control of Master Chief's POV.

In contrast, *The Stanley Parable*'s opening cinematic sequence makes the atypical decision to cut to

Stanley's point-of-view only to cut out again, completing the standard three-shot shot/reverse-

shot/shot sequence: Stanley focused on his computer cut to a computer from Stanley's perspective

cut to a third shot showing Stanley staring at his computer. Where other first-person games seem to

take pains to avoid highlighting the distinction between the player's perspective watching over the

diegetic world and the avatar's perspective in the world, [136] *The Stanley Parable* reinforces the split by

couching the point-of-view shot within a third-person narration. In a following shot, the distance

between the player and Stanley is shown quite literally, as a shot that begins in a relatively medium-

close-up of Stanley tracks out to such a distant vantage point that Stanley's office is rendered into a

small fragment of a larger unrendered space, something like an interior set on an empty soundstage,

or, more aptly, the image of a video game level in the process of being designed.

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[136] For more on this see, Calleja, *In-Game*, 126-32.

Figure 2.2-H Screenshot from *The Stanley Parable's* opening cinematic sequence

Even as we are soon to "become" Stanley, we are urged to keep this overarching image in mind—a

menial drone in someone else's constructed world. The actual transition to the player's control

occurs during the final shot of the opening cut-scene, when the narration notably returns to a

perspective closely resembling the earlier point-of-view shot from Stanley's perspective, this time as

he watches a blinking green cursor on his computer screen (Figure 2.2-I).

Figure 2.2-I The moment players are given some control over the perspective

On this occasion though, perspective begins to slowly track away from the computer,

communicating that the view is slowly adjusting so as to directly merge with a more plausible

eyeline. The narrator's description at this moment underscores the strangeness underlying this

transfer of control: "Something was very clearly wrong. Shocked, frozen solid, Stanley found himself

unable to move for the longest time…" The irony underlying this line of dialogue is that Stanley is

"frozen solid" because the game is still operating in a cinematic mode and therefore has yet to grant

the player the ability to move Stanley. The actual handover only occurs during the subsequent line of

dialogue, as a slight tilt up of the camera shifts the perspective from a slightly elevated angle to one

that seems eye-level, signaling Stanley's gaze is moving away from the computer. While the narrator

is mid-sentence—"…as he came to his wits and regained his senses…"—the tilted angle levels off

and the game fully transfers control to the player before the narrator finishes his sentence—"he got

up from his desk and stepped out of his office." The player can now use the keyboard and mouse

(or a suitable controller) to control Stanley within the diegetic world, guiding Stanley's actions and

perspective. What was a cinematic point-of-view shot representing the perspective of the character, has now perhaps become something else entirely.

This transfer of control in *The Stanley Parable* is subtle to the point that a player would be forgiven for failing to notice it has even taken place, nevertheless, in theory, it represents a crucial modal division between the film and video game address. The fact that the image appearing on screen remains virtually unchanged, exemplifies how close these media are to one another, yet it also illustrates how different their respective acts of reception. In the beginning of the shot, the image should be understood essentially as a third-person, cinematic representation of Stanley's perspective, something supported by its previous use in the sequence. However, by the end of the shot, the image is ostensibly what we think of as a first-person perspective in video games. As a video game image, the player's agency over the visual composition potentially resists the status of representation. What appears on screen is rendered into something more ambiguous. While still in the cinematic sequence, the point-of-view shot is still a representation of the Stanley's perspective. However, once the player is granted some amount of control over the images' composition, what appears on screen exceeds the representation of the character's perspective because now, to some extent, it also illustrates the player's perspective.[137]

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[137] This distinction is significantly less pronounced, however, when we compare video games to 360-Degree and Virtual Reality films. In these films—if they can indeed be called films—the image that appears on screen is subject to change at the spectator's discretion. The image expressed at any given moment is just a fraction of what could be expressed. One could argue that these examples are effectively no different from the fact that a spectator's attention of a traditional film is only focused on a select portion of the frame, so effectively this distinction is inconsequential. Tati's *Playtime* (1968) provides an illustrative, albeit extreme case-in-point for this argument because it includes a number of extreme-long shots that refrain from directing the spectator's attention, and provide multiple visual narratives simultaneously. The spectator is compelled to choose what to focus on at any given moment. However, what still separates video games, 360 videos, and VR films from this is clearer when considering *secondary* onlookers—those watching the player's screen or Twitch stream, those sitting next to a person who is using a keyboard to move the perspective around during a 360-degree-video, or those observing a live or recorded feed of the VR spectator's experience. In these cases, the primary spectator implicitly limits the range of viewing for the secondary viewer, effectively providing an additional level of mediation (or narration) between the text and what is viewed. Additionally, video games are further distinguished from 360 and VR films because video game players effect happenings within the diegesis.

The central distinction between these modes, it would seem, stems from the player's agency. Once the player is granted control, the status of the expression and the way the form addresses its onlooker shifts accordingly. The implicit presumption is that while operating in a cinematic mode, the expression onscreen and through the speakers is a product of some anterior intentional agency; it is the manifestation of some imprecise, external force that, for the sake of clarity or the "author function," we might attribute to a director. However, once the cinematic sequence ends, and the player been granted some modicum of control over the image, this can no longer be the case exactly. Effectively, the player now informs what appears on screen, deciding things like where Stanley looks, how long he spends in a room, and where his body is positioned. Once in the gameplay mode, then, the player is no longer only being addressed solely as a non-diegetic spectator with some control over the composition of the image while observing the unfolding events from the vantage point of their own world, the player is now also being addressed as a participant acting in the diegetic world, one who either is "Stanley" or controls Stanley's actions.

In fact, much of the way *The Stanley Parable* works is by deliberately breaching the gap between the player's positions inside and outside the fictional world by purposefully desynchronizing them from one another. When the narrator says that Stanley "stepped out of his office," the past-tense designates an action that has already occurred in the diegetic world. Yet, this statement contradicts what the player sees and experiences on-screen as the player has not yet had the opportunity of guiding Stanley to accomplish this task by the end of the narrator's description. What is billed as a description of Stanley's diegetic action, instead becomes an awkward non-diegetic instruction to the player. While this tension could be missed by the player in the moment, it still marks the beginning of the game's insistent effort to strain any harmony between the player's dual roles as both a non-diegetic puppeteer and diegetic actor.

While *The Stanley Parable*'s reflexivity specifically highlights these dual positions by deconstructing them, the broader suggestion is that all narrative video games effectively address players in the same way. To some extent video game scholars have already recognized this. For instance, Robert Buerkle makes a version of this argument when he explains that all video game narration essentially falls on a continuum between internal (diegetic) and external (nondiegetic) positioning and, that these modes of address occur simultaneously. Similarly, Alexander Galloway makes a similar division in his consideration of the player as "non-diegetic operator" and a "diegetic operator."[138] Accordingly, an analysis of *The Stanley Parable* illustrates how the player's input shapes the camera movement, camera angles, and the composition of the frame, and corresponding diegetic decisions, such as what Stanley is doing and where he is positioned. Still, it is the presumption of agency that seemingly engenders the dual address, because the player must be solicited into taking up this role in regard to the expression of the text.

Yet, the mode of address that positions the player both outside and inside the fictional world is perhaps less of a departure from film spectatorship than most video game scholars have presumed. Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological approach to film spectatorship provides a model of the film experience that finds complementary understanding of the cinematic spectator. For Sobchack, "cinematic perception" has a "double and reversible nature" because we, as spectators, experience these images and sensations both directly and through a kind of mediation: "the viewer…shares cinematic space with the film but must also negotiate it, contribute to and perform the constitution of its experiential significance."[139] While Aarseth would argue that "performance" is less impactful in cinema compared to a video games because it "takes place all in the [spectator's]

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[138] Robert Buerkle, *Of Worlds and Avatars: A Playercentric Approach to Videogame Discourse* (University of Southern California, 2008), 275-82. In Alexander Galloway's terms this would be a "the diegetic operator act" where the operator's incitement causes an "action inside the imaginary world of the gameplay." Galloway, *Gaming Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, 33.

[139] Vivian Carol Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1992), 8.

head," Sobchack's point is that the cinematic text inevitably addresses spectators as collaborators both inside and outside the film world and we experience it accordingly.[140]

What is more, Sobchack considers the cinematic spectatorial dynamic as something of an active communication between the spectator and the text: When we watch films, we are "engaged in a living dialogue with a world that sufficiently exceeds our grasp of it as we necessarily intend toward it, a world in which we are finitely situated as embodied beings and yet always informed by a decisive motility." In her understanding, film spectators indeed maintain a level of primary, unmediated experience while watching a film as we negotiate our experience in relation to the images we are presented with. We live them both as firsthand experience and as something mediated, which is why Sobchack stresses the way a film's narration remains beyond the spectator's influence. That is, the "decisive motility" that informs our experience could formally be understood as the multiple layers of narration that effectively facilitate and circumscribe the "living dialogue" that we have in relation to a given film. On a practical level, spectators are subject to camera movement, mise-en-scène, editing—all of which are aspects of narration or the "decisive motility" that are set prior to the subjective spectatorial experience.

With this in mind, *The Stanley Parable* helps us recognize that the range of "decisive motility" certainly shifts when it comes to video games, but it does not vanish altogether. In *The Stanley Parable*, this "decisive motility" would have to include the performative role of the voiceover narrator who embodies the designer's will, but it also must include the subtler parameters in relation to the physical properties of the diegesis and the literal architecture that provides the navigable spaces of the game's world. The player's control over Stanley as a window into the diegetic world is subject to layers of both diegetic and non-diegetic limitations. Without hacking the game, the player cannot move Stanley through walls, alter the object textures or structures, or change the way

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[140] Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 1.

narrative sequences are triggered. Similarly, the player can only have Stanley look around to the extent that this ability makes sense in relation to Stanley's offscreen body. Each diegetic constraint also informs what is possible for player to influence in terms of non-diegetic narration. The range of camera movements and angles, what can be part of the mise-en-scène, the lighting, are all tied to what the game's designer has permitted the player to affect in the diegetic world. The player cannot create narrational edits or compose new dialogue unless the game allows for this to occur. In *The Stanley Parable*, as in most narrative video games, the player's range of choices are meticulously circumscribed within the game's coded parameters, and so the player's experience is still—like Sobchack's notion of film spectatorship—greatly "informed by a decisive motility" that "exceed[s] our grasp."

The Stanley Parable demonstrates, then, that the player's primary contribution while playing is in narration rather than narrative. Once we recognize that the video game text should include all possible iterations, what appears to be a player's collaborative agency is revealed to be a limited contribution to the narration of the text. Meaningful agency and the perception of meaningful interaction is perhaps only possible if the player is granted the ability to actually manipulate the underlying parameters of the text in a way that was not designated ahead of time. However, if a text is materially designed to account for all possible permutations, then there is no real ability to meaningfully affect the textual parameters.

This leads us to the observation that video game critics have tended to greatly exaggerate the range of player agency based solely on the material variability of the form, when in reality players are highly limited in their capacity to shape that form.[141] The limitations of player's role is all the more

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[141] Bolter imagines video game players as "performers" not unlike actors and musicians in "dramas or musical scores." The problem with Bolter's analogy is that the video game performance is much more circumscribed then he realizes. Additionally, in the next chapter, we will discuss the how film spectators are similarly performing a role. This conception helps support the notion that video game playing provides a receptive distinction in a matter degree rather than kind.

clear when in the context of formalist narratological models, like those devised by Edward Branigan, which have long recognized the multiple simultaneous levels of narration operating in fiction that exist in a range from inside to outside the diegesis.[142] Without closely reiterating all eight layers of narration Branigan suggests, in most video games the player's contribution needs to be qualified distinctly in terms of the limited influence over only a few of these levels of narration. Meanwhile most levels of narration in most games remain firmly outside the player's control. So, while video game players, as co-narrators, might be said to contribute to the textual expression more so than in film, it is also crucial to recognize how the range of their contribution is decidedly defined within highly designed parameters.

Another relevant point—one missed by those generalizing about video games based on their material properties—is the tremendous diversity among video games in terms of where and how players are granted spaces to influence the narration. Even within just those video games in MoMA's collection we find a sizable range, one that coincidentally *The Stanley Parable* provides direct insight into in one of its narrative branches. In a certain sequence where the voiceover narrator takes up the guise of a frustrated game designer, he transports players into facsimiles of two iconic first-person games that also happen to have been acquired by MoMA, *Portal* and *Minecraft*. While in these worlds, the narrator cheekily contrasts *Minecraft's* open-ended "sand-box" plotless structure with *Portal's* more rigid storytelling, the latter being used as an example of what the narrator refers to as "something more narrow and linear, something that really makes [the player] feel utterly irrelevant." Even while *The Stanley Parable* is specifically focused on storytelling, the comparison effectively suggests several different ways that these games differ in terms of textuality and receptive agency. *Portal's* plotline and prescribed limitations provide clear ways to analyze it in relation to narrative

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[142] Chap. 4, "Levels of Narration," Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 86–124.

films, while *Minecraft's* seemingly endless capacity for building sub-worlds makes it feel less restrictive, but also something that is perhaps less "authored" altogether.[143]

2.2.3 Realism and Interaction

The Stanley Parable is a particularly fitting game to consider in relation to other media because it may be the clearest example to date of a video game that fits neatly into the cross-media tradition of lighthearted works fixated on their own authorship and reception. The list of these facetious meta-texts would likely include the literary works of Laurence Sterne and John Barthes; some of the films and animations of Jean-Luc Godard, Hollis Frampton, Woody Allen, Chuck Jones, and Charlie Kaufmann; and perhaps some of the paintings by Reneé Magritte and Pablo Picasso. (If this list sounds too high minded, it should be noted that more than any other text, *The Stanley Parable* shares much with the more accessible "Charlie Kaufman-lite," film *Stranger than Fiction* (2004)—even beginning with the same opening line: "This is a story about a man named…"[144]) These are works that flout the expected function of, say, telling a self-contained story by making the formal narration visible, performatively compelling their beholder to reflect on the conventions of their respective forms. Locating *The Stanley Parable's* position within this tradition is helpful precisely because it allows us to articulate both the qualities of narration shared across media, as well as what aspects may be more prevalent in video games.

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[143] Part of the point here is that any video game that is understood as an aesthetic object, must also be understood as a mediated textual experience on a continuum with other aesthetic forms. The critical aesthetic framework, which apprehends an object as a meaningful textual expression, relies on the presumption of an anterior purposiveness, or what is effectively the "author function." So, when a video game is understood as an aesthetic object, we imagine it to be "authored" and thus acknowledge a level of "decisive motility." Alternatively, it is quite possible that, at a certain point, a game like *Minecraft* is no longer apprehended as an authored text, but only as a platform or a tool for making other authored texts. What is essential to recognize, though, is that the amount of decisive motility afforded to a player is entirely dependent on what the video game designer has allotted within the game's parameters.

[144] Phelim O'Neill, "The Guide: Pick of the Day: Stranger Than Fiction," *The Guardian (London, England)* 2008.

Depending on one's critical proclivity, this metatextual tradition could be associated with modernism, postmodernism, Brechtian "distanciation," Wollen's (related) "counter-cinema," Michael Fried's "theatricality," the Russian formalist concept of "defamiliarization," and probably a number of other formal movements.[145] Regardless how they are categorized, what remains consistent across these works in their respective media are calculated and performative violations of the formal strategies that conceal narration in a mode we associate with realism. To be clear, the notion of "realism" to which I refer is a formalist, historically contingent stylistic concept, one that is characterized more by concealed narration and an illusionism—something we will discuss more in depth in the Chapter 3—than any connection to a mimetic capacity or "social realism." Following Frederic Jameson, realism is in large part about producing the sense of coherent fictional world, one that the beholder can experience without questioning its integrity. Jameson describes how "realism and its specific narrative forms construct their new world by *programming* their reader" effectively "training them in their new habits and practices… new subject positions in a new kind of space." [146] All of this occurs without the reader being aware, through a relatively seamless narration.

If realism effectively programs beholders through a kind of invisible narration, then there is a clear resemblance between MoMA's notion of "interaction design" in its description of video games and the formal strategies of realism. As we may recall, MoMA's statement in regard to video games includes the equation between "quality of interaction" and "synthesis of form and function." This characterization, however, not only works for purely functional objects, but it works for works

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[145] There are several theoretical constructs through we might associate with this reflexivity: Brechtian "distanciation"; Wollen's related "counter-cinema"; Michael Fried's "theatricality"; Russian formalist "defamiliarization." Peter Wollen, "Godard and Counter-Cinema: Vent D'est'," in *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, ed. Bill Nichols (Univ of California Press, 1985). Colin MacCabe, "Theory and Film: Principles of Realism and Pleasure," *Screen* 17, no. 3 (1976). Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Univ of California Press, 1980). Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, vol. 542 (Macmillan, 1964).
To remain consistent with the next chapter's discussion of play and Caillois notion of mimetic play, it is also helpful to think about realism in terms of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief."

[146] Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 166. This idea is something we will come back to in the next chapter.

of realism as well because the "synthesis of form and function" is also an effective way to describe the formal strategies for producing a work that hides its narration. After all, the Classical Hollywood film—one that can be linked with a period specific notion of conventional realism—has a form that is always functional because it tells a story and produces a fictional world seamlessly and economically through an "invisible" narrational style.[147] Every stylistic decision of the narration is motivated in the service of telling a coherent story that keeps viewers immersed, engaged, and informed. In this sense, the classical style is comprised of functional components operating in concert in order to create a work of realism—not unlike how complex design objects are comprised of functional components that together allow them to "work."

As in film and literature, then, "realism" in video games is a moving target that must be situated and historicized. However, while the specific strategies for meeting this target surely change with context, a principle component of video game realism requires minimizing the discrepancies between the video game's dual addresses in relation to the player's experience. This means reducing players' mindfulness of their role outside the diegesis using strategies like avoiding non-diegetic narration whenever possible, disguising non-diegetic narration as motivated diegetic narration, relying on acceptable generic conventions for expressing non-diegetic narration, or acclimating players to non-diegetic narration until it becomes conventional. Significantly, these are all aspects of the experience that *The Stanley Parable* performatively thwarts. The reflexive metatexts intentionally undermine their operation by strategically disrupting the *synthesis of form and function* and draw attention to those processes normally taken for granted in the reception of works of realism. By reflexively countering realism's programming revealing and caricaturing the strategies normally used

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[147] David Bordwell, "Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Princioples and Procedures," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 26. In "classical narration, style typically encourages the spectator to construct a coherent, consistent time and space of the [story's events]." See ibid. For more on this see David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

to create the sense of coherent narratives and believable worlds, these metatexts are also articulating the functional design that principally enables the suspension of disbelief.

The implication from all of this is that what MoMA thinks of as interaction, and what scholars like Aarseth think of as narrative collaboration, are largely the product of video games operating in the style of realism. That is, video game realism entails maintaining the illusion of the player's meaningful agency over the narrative and sense of a truly reciprocal communication. *The Stanley Parable* unmasks this because it disrupts the player's sense of agency and interaction precisely by countering the conventions of realism in video games. Players' agency and interaction are exposed as illusions cultivated by a variable and responsive material form, one that has a tendency to mask an authored text as a truly dynamic unfinished text because of its mode of address. As we turn to a discussion of interactive design in film, we will see that this mode of address is also not determined by the material form itself.

CHAPTER 3

Play-spaces beyond Video Games: Playing *In* and *With* Film Worlds

3.1 AESTHETICS AND GAMEPLAY: RESONANCES ACROSS MEDIA

In the introduction, we discussed two valences of *play* relevant to thinking about video games: the

first is the valence of *play* we associate with *gameplay*; the second is the *play* which evolved from the

more performative playing of a musical instruments to the reception-based playing recorded media.

Instead of seeing these valences of *play* as wholly distinct modes of experience, this chapter suggests

that gameplay and aesthetic reception are much more linked than most realize. This helps us explain

why it is that that key formalist accounts of aesthetic reception in painting, literature, and film, sound

a lot like description of playing a video game. Perhaps this is not all that surprising when we recall

Lev Manovich's argument that "interactivity," a quality so closely associated with video games,[1] has

long been central to aesthetic experiences across media. But how does this so-called aesthetic

interactivity operate in practice? To answer this, we will begin with the art critic behind Manovich's

argument, E.H. Gombrich, whose theories of aesthetic reception influence is found in several

theories across media that seem to unexpectedly prefigure elements of *gameplay* found in video

games.

One explanation for Gombrich's cross-media influence is his blend of formal and

phenomenological conceptions of the aesthetic experience—both through close readings of

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[1] This point was discussed previously in the Introduction and Chapter 2.

aesthetic objects and consideration of how those objects are experienced in practice.[2] Another

advantage of Gombrich's approach is that it provides a productive outlet for deriving the aesthetic

encounter through introspection: in his 1960 work *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich explains that "if we

watch ourselves in our reaction [to paintings], we are presented with a kind of slow-motion picture

of the mechanism that jumps into action whenever we search for the meaning of an image." Here

we begin to see how Gombrich already imagines aesthetic reception in dynamic terms we might

associate with *gameplay*. For Gombrich, aesthetic reception is not some passive process where people

experience a painting's objective expression; it is a dynamic, operational exchange, as reception

entails systematically interrogating a painting by implicitly testing theories or readings in an ongoing

effort to derive "meaning of an image."[3] For Gombrich, "meaning" is less about identifying a

definitive signification, than it is about understanding the experience one has in an encounter with

an artwork through a cognitive process of reception. Gombrich's term for the individual

apprehending the aesthetic object is the "beholder," which is in part noteworthy for its cross-media

application. In a chapter called "The Beholder's Share," Gombrich explains that we, as beholders,

assume a "state of readiness to start projecting, to thrust out the tentacles of phantom colours and

phantom images which always flicker around our perceptions." For Gombrich, it is the beholder's

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[2] In relation to film studies, the combination of focusing on both the film text and the viewer's mode of perception makes room for some of the principle critical approaches in theories of reception. Take, for example, Janet Staiger's account of media reception theories, in which she positions all reception theories (and theorists) according to where they derive meaning. There are the "text-activated" theories privileging the film text as the site of understanding reception. There is also the "reader-activated" theories, alternatively, acknowledge the theoretically innumerable ways in which spectators could experience a text. Staiger also identifies the "context-activated" approach—with which her own historical materialist approach aligns.Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton University Press, 1992), 35. In theory, Gombrich's approach would be open to all three.

[3] E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New York U6 - ctx_ver=Z39.88-2004&ctx_enc=info%3Aofi%2Fenc%3AUTF-8&rfr_id=info%3Asid%2Fsummon.serialssolutions.com&rft_val_fmt=info%3Aofi%2Ffmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Abook&rft.genre=book&rft.title=Art+and+illusion&rft.au=Gombrich%2C+E.+H&rft.series=Bollingen+series%2C+35.+The+A.+W.+Mellon+lectures+in+the+fine+arts%2C+5&rft.date=1960&rft.pub=Pantheon+Books&rft.externalDocID=3050728&paramdict=en-US U7 - Book: Pantheon Books, 1960), 186. "Meaning" is rather layered term for Gombrich which also includes an artworks' "effects." Even works that resist "meaning" through abstraction and randomness—the action paintings of Jackson Pollock, being Ghombrich's example—are nonetheless beheld through frames of reference to representative forms of signification. Ibid., 231-32.

operation that brings the work to fruition; the artwork only really exists in the way it is experienced. Once the beholder views it, the painting "has no firm anchorage left on the canvas—it is only 'conjured up' in our minds" before we "project[s] it…into the mosaic…of the canvas before [us]." Beholders engage with an image through their own subjective ideas and preconceptions, their own unique receptive styles what he later calls "a game of projections."[4]

At the same time, beholders are not granted free reign over the text's interpretation in this framework. Gombrich describes reception in terms of a "mechanism," suggesting an involuntary process that triggers in the act of reception. In this active yet delimited role, Gombrich imagines the beholder in terms that resonate remarkably well for video game players. As we have previously noted, video game players actively make choices, but those choices are always funneled ahead of time by the game's design parameters, and Gombrich's beholder is similarly involved in what he calls a "guided projection" where the beholder's metaphorical journey is "activated" by the formal qualities of the work. Beholders, in this model, are being hailed by the painting to participate, as they are "induced to project" some framework of apprehension based on "the clues presented," not unlike how video game players are cued to provide inputs by the game's address. Additionally, in both video game playing and Gombrich's notion of aesthetic reception, there is a sense of progress through trial-and-error, as players and beholders test out paths and investigate routes. Gombrich describes the process where "misreadings…flit through our minds but are usually discarded before we become aware of them and because they are overlaid by the more consistent and more tenable hypothesis." It is all the more fitting that Gombrich uses ludic terms to describe this aesthetic process as an "interplay between the artists and beholder" where beholders search for a "solution to

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[4] Ibid., 160, 78.

the puzzle which the image presents to us," and perhaps "take pleasure in this game of reading brushstrokes."[5]

About 15 years after Gombrich's account, we find a related notion of reception making again making the comparison between aesthetic objects and puzzles, this time in Wolfgang Iser's reading of literary reception in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response.* Specifically, Iser describes textual ambiguities as "puzzles that [readers] have to solve [themselves]."[6] In addition to resembling Gombrich and using ludic analogies, Iser's model of reception also provides a resolute connection to the computational aspects of video games. He describes textual reception in terms that could very well be something found somewhere in a Human-Computer Interaction textbook, if his "reader" stands in for "user," and "text" for "interface":

> *The text is a whole system of… processes, and …there must be a place within this system for the person who is to perform the reconstituting. This place is marked by the gaps in the text—it consists in the blanks which the reader is to fill in. …The gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves. Hence the structured blanks of the text stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text…The blanks leave open the connections between perspectives in the text, and so spur the reader into coordinating these perspectives—in other words, they induce the reader to perform basic operations within the text.*

Retroactively, much of Iser's language sounds like computer programming jargon with phrases such as "system of…processes," "function," and "basic operations." In Iser's model, the text is like a computer interface that requires a user's input to run. The author's role is to "designate instructions for the production of the signified," but the fruition of the text is accomplished by the reader, who renders "indeterminacy" into "determinacy." While the text is elastic, the indeterminacy does not connote absolute relativity. Instead, it provides something more like a negotiation: "the meaning of the text remains related to what the printed text says, … [yet] it requires the creative imagination of the reader to put it all together." In this conception, texts are comprised of

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[5] Ibid., 180-86, 59, 81.
[6] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading : A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 129.

communicative protocols that provide guidelines and instructions, but do not dictate interpretations. Furthermore, because there is no fixed signification, the eventual text might also always be shaped by formal, historical, contextual, and socio-political variables.[7] Iser's author resembles the video game designer who constructs the schema within which a subsequent, conscious presence will eventually operate. Both the author and the game designer are figures who encode a set of possibilities and define a range of experiences to some degree, but the code cannot entirely determine the subsequent encounter it engenders.

As with Gombrich, Iser's notion only understands an artwork itself through the aesthetic experience, which is why the book is something other than what is written on the page. Instead the artworks are abstract concepts or what he calls the "virtual position" between the literal text as given and the reader's realization: "[the artwork's] actualization is clearly the result of an interaction between the two, and so exclusive concentration on either the author's techniques or the reader's psychology will tell us little about the reading process itself."[8] For Iser, there is no "definitive" fixed version of an artwork, only a series of iterations enabled by the literal words on the page as they are filtered through the reader's subjective imaginations, a theory he develops in part by citing Gombrich.[9]

When these same ideas are applied to film studies, Gombrich's influence has perhaps found its greatest purchase in the theories of David Bordwell, whose textbooks could be said to have had an inordinate influence on the entire discourse. For one thing, Bordwell's basic conception of spectatorship is based on Gombrich's idea that "perception is a process of active hypothesis-

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[7] For this equivocation, Iser is also harshly criticized by Stanley Fish. See Stanley Fish, "Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser," *Diacritics* 11, no. 1 (1981). In a sense, Fish's criticism of Iser's overly broad notion of the text could apply to Gombrich and Bordwell as well. However, this does not negate their use here.
[8] Iser, *The Act of Reading : A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, 20-22.
[9] Ibid., 90-93.

testing," which Bordwell cites as a pivotal component of his own theory of narration.[10] Further still, in a chapter of Bordwell's 1985 *Narration in the Fiction Film* aptly titled "The Viewer's Activity"—a chapter title undoubtedly mimicking Gombrich's own chapter "The Beholder's Share"—Bordwell echoes Gombrich's conception of a responsive dynamic between the aesthetic object and the viewer, explaining that a "film cues the spectator to execute a definable variety of operations." And, like Iser, Bordwell use of terms such as "execute" and "operations" seem to pave way for a connection to computer programming. This is further explained by Bordwell's computational articulation of human perception: "seeing is…not a passive absorption of stimuli. It is a constructive activity, involving very fast computations, stored concepts, and various purposes, expectations and hypotheses." Bordwell conceives of human cognition as a series of operational process—sensorial data is inputted, decrypted through a configuration of internal references points, and rendered in the imagination as it is apprehended.

This framework also informs Bordwell's description of the aesthetic experience, which both continues to echo Gombrich and provides yet another analogic description for playing video games provided we imagine some slight alterations (i.e. if "artwork" was changed to "video game" and "spectator" to "player"):

> *The artwork is necessarily incomplete, needing to be unified and fleshed out by the active participation of the perceiver. To some extent, artworks exploit the automatic nature of bottom-up processing; in such cases, the work can create illusions. But art is a domain of top-down procedures. The spectator brings to the artwork expectations and hypotheses born of schemata, those in turn being derived from everyday experience, other artworks and so forth. The artwork sets limits on what the spectator does. Salient perceptual features and the overall form of the artwork function as both triggers and constraints. The artwork is made so as to encourage the application of certain schemata, even if those must eventually be discarded in the course of the perceiver's activity.*

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[10] Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, 186.

Both the artwork and the video game provide a set of givens, which are, in turn, perceived, comprehended, and responded to through the spectator/player's activity. The work itself is a product of negotiation. The formal qualities of the artwork correspond with scripted protocols in a software program; they provide the rules and parameters that structure the encounter, but they do not wholly determine the outcome. What an artwork means, how it is experienced, depends on the perceiver's "goal oriented" activity.[11] As a player choosing how to navigate the calculated design of a video game, the spectator finds a way to apprehend the given work.

3.1.1 Gameplay Guide

The resonance between aesthetics and video games is even less of a leap if we recognize a related receptive premise. In these admittedly abridged accounts of Gombrich, Iser, and Bordwell's theories of aesthetic reception, we find a common strategy to define the artwork as an abstract construct—one that essentially exists only as a negotiation between the given object and the perceiver's interpretation. In each account, the experience itself is bounded to a degree by the formal parameters set by the object and related discursive conventions, yet tremendous agency is afforded to perceivers in their ability to freely navigate those parameters in their subjective experiences. All of this is premised, however, on the assumption that the perceiver is approaching the object as something authored to subsequently experienced. This aesthetic lens apprehends the cultural artifact with the assumption of purposefulness, a metaphorical or representational significance. In other words, the aesthetic object is apprehended under the assumption that it is *playable*.

The connection between *gameplay* and reception is indeed one made by Bordwell and Kristen Thompson in their ubiquitous and discourse-shaping film studies textbook, *Film Art,* which

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[11] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 30-38.

describes film reception akin to "games" where separate "rules" and "…the laws of everyday reality don't operate."[12] The "game" in this context is more than a simple analogy for how films are consciously interpreted or comprehended through playful language practices; it is a way of approaching film as something as an encounter operating in its own dimension of sorts. When we watch a film, we are being placed in a world apart from—but not unrelated to—the world we experience as "reality." The very dichotomy of the diegetic and non-diegetic address is premised on the construction of a fictional world. Notably, this conception recalls Johan Huizinga's foundational concept in (game)play theory regarding the "magic circle," which has become synonymous with "temporary worlds within the ordinary world dedicated to the performance of an act apart."[13]

Both *gameplay* and aesthetic reception operate under a set of rules defined in part by their alterity from the conditions and consequences operating in what we take to be the real world. As such these experiences are placed outside the realm of the practical concerns of the everyday and into a somewhat distinct discursive sphere. What Bordwell and Thompson understand as the "game" engendered by film reception essentially takes place in what Huizinga calls a "play-space." These play-spaces may be thought of abstractly—perhaps similar to how Iser imagines the "virtual" meeting place of the reader and the text—but, in narrative works, these spaces entail a more literal articulation in the notion of the diegesis.[14] And, while there is already substantial discourse regarding the topic of narrative, aesthetics, and world-building,[15] the congruences between the characteristics

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[12] David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Jeremy Ashton, *Film Art: An Introduction*, vol. 7 (McGraw-Hill New York, 1997), 74.

[13] The "magic circle" got singled out from Huizinga's larger list of play-grounds to be the most oft-cited and canonical phrase to come out of Huizinga's work. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens; a Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston,: Beacon Press, 1955), 10. It is also worth mentioning, that while Huizinga deems the artist and the poet as operating in a mode of play, he does not explicitly recognize the aesthetic reception as existing in a play-space.

[14] Fluck, "Imaginary Space; or, Space as Aesthetic Object."

[15] For examples see Jesper Juul, *Half-Real : Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005); Walter Benjamin and Rolf Tiedemann, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999); Mark J. P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds : The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Lubomír Dolezel, *Heterocosmica : Fiction and Possible Worlds* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,

of video game playing and narrative film reception in this regard is still a vastly underexplored topic. Accordingly, this chapter uses the resonance between *gameplay* and aesthetic reception to demonstrate reasons why it is productive to think about our encounter with narrative film worlds akin to ways we encounter the play-spaces of narrative video games.

To investigate and illustrate this idea, this chapter looks closely at Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*, which is a remarkable film for demonstrating how video game playing can relate to film reception. On its face, *The Truman Show* has absolutely nothing to do with video games, and, yet, it feels uncannily familiar to those who enjoy narrative video games, something a few critics have already noted. [16] This is because the film has a rather unusual way of positioning its spectator in relation to the fictional world it creates. Specifically, the film's multiple diegetic layers allow the spectator to remain both in a reflexive position outside one layer of the film, while remaining effectively absorbed inside another layer of the film. This produces a mode of engagement that feels particularly resonant with video game players' roles as external narrators and participants. Further still, *The Truman Show's* narrative provides a tremendously productive allegory for the process of of coming into consciousness during the act of reception and effectively engaging works of realism as critical play-spaces.

1991); Daniel Yacavone, *Film Worlds : A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema* (New York, US: Columbia University Press, 2015). The foundational works of theory in this discourse are Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1978). and Kendall L Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Harvard University Press, 1990).

[16] I am not the first person to note the film's resonance with video games. See Rolf F. Nohr, ""The Truman Show"," in *Space Time Play: Computer Games, Architecture and Urbanism: The Next Level*, ed. Drew Davidson, et al. (Springer Science & Business Media, 2007); Jim Blascovich, "Social Influence within Immersive Virtual Environments," in *The Social Life of Avatars* (Springer, 2002).

3.1.2 Experiencing The Truman Show

The Truman Show is a film that defies easy categorization because it seems to embody several formal and cultural contradictions. It is a mainstream Hollywood film starring a box office draw in Jim Carrey, but it is also a high-concept film that does not fit into any discernible genre, and it is directed by Peter Weir, a filmmaker who had gained credibility as a foreign art-house director of films such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) and *The Last Wave* (1977), before producing mainstream prestige Hollywood films like *Dead Poet's Society* (1989). Likewise, *The Truman Show*'s themes ostensibly grapple with narrative and social matters that seem both pointed and broad, as the film examines notions of utopia, the myth of the "American Dream," television culture, the nuclear family, artistic ethics, psychological delusions, privacy, and theism. The film has also had a fairly unusual cultural legacy in that it became associated with a phenomenon that mental health professionals have dubbed the "Truman Show Delusion," which describes instances when the symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia manifest in delusions that resemble the premise of the film.[17] Relatedly, the film seems especially prescient in retrospect because it directly presaged both the surge in reality television production of the late 1990s, and the mainstream practice of people broadcasting their personal lives through internet social networks.[18]

While the film was well received by popular critics upon its release, it has received relatively little sustained scholarly attention within film studies.[19] One possible explanation for this is that the

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[17] Joel Gold and Ian Gold, "The "Truman Show" Delusion: Psychosis in the Global Village," *Cognitive neuropsychiatry* 17, no. 6 (2012).

[18] *The Truman Show* was released well after reality television shows like *MTV's The Real World* which began in 1992, but before staple reality shows like CBS's *Survivor* and *Big Brother*.

[19] The attention it has received from scholars almost always reads the film as commentary on mass media and surveillance. See Mark Deuze, "Media Life," *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 1 (2011); Lavoie Dusty, "Escaping the Panopticon Utopia, Hegemony, and Performance in Peter Weir's *the Truman Show*," *Utopian Studies* 22, no. 1 (2011); J Macgregor Wise, "Mapping the Culture of Control: Seeing through the Truman Show," *Television & New Media* 3, no. 1 (2002); Ronald Bishop, "Good Afternoon, Good Evening, and Good Night: The Truman Show as Media Criticism," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (2000).

film can, at times, feel heavy-handed in its attempt to evoke a sense of pretentious symbolism, something evidenced by character names such as Truman ("true man") and Christof ("of Christ"). A related point is made by Simone Knox in what is perhaps the only article to provide a comprehensive close-reading of *The Truman Show*. She argues that scholars have neglected the film because its blatant self-reflexivity resists formulaic critical interventions. For Knox, meta-texts like *The Truman Show* present additional challenges because they "contains a degree of (self) analysis already,…pre-empting…the analyst's job."[20] This would certainly be an astute observation to apply to the reflexivity of last chapter's *The Stanley Parable*, however, as Knox also argues, *The Truman Show* cannot simply be categorized as a reflexive work. This is because *The Truman Show* layers its reflexivity within the diegesis of the film by placing reflexivity within a larger, non-reflexive frame. In fact, what distinguishes *The Truman Show's* reflexivity from the overtly performative reflexivity in *The Stanley Parable*, is one of the chief reasons the film is so instructive for connecting film spectatorship to video game playing.

As with other narratives often characterized as self-reflexive, *The Truman Show* provides a diegesis within the diegesis. Specifically, within the primary diegesis of *The Truman Show* film, Truman inhabits what is essentially a second-order fictional world of the television program "The Truman Show." (For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the world Truman believes as real—that is, the diegesis depicted on the television show "The Truman Show"—as "Seahaven"; the diegetic television show itself will still be called "The Truman Show").[21] A few critics have read *The Truman Show's* layers as ideologically problematic because they privilege the cinematic world as authentic,

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[20]Simone Knox, "Reading the Truman Show inside Out," *Film Criticism* 35, no. 1 (2010): 18.

[21] The film's end credits are actually broken down into three categories: "Truman's World," "Christof's World," and "The Viewers." To some extent, "Truman's World" is essentially what I am calling "Seahaven," while "Christof's World" and "The Viewers" are both part of the primary diegesis of the film *The Truman Show*. This is complicated however, by the diegetic actors breaking character while on the setting for the television show, ostensibly shifting them from Truman's World to Chirstof's World.

true, and real, in opposition to the televisual world which is artificial, deceptive, and fake.[22] However, as Knox points out, the film's narrative frames present a more nuanced relationship than a simple oppositional dichotomy because of their "co-presence."[23] More importantly, the layers have a strong parallel with narrative video games' tendency to position players in roles both inside and outside the game worlds simultaneously.[24] In order to understand this idea, though, it is crucial to comprehend how *The Truman Show*'s layers operate both in relation to each other and the film audience.

   Though many of the details behind *The Truman Show's* premise are disclosed late into the film, they are worth recounting at the start of our analysis to better illustrate the idiosyncratic ways the film provides expository information to the spectator. One important moment of exposition comes about an hour into the film through a faux behind-the-scenes special, presumably being broadcast on television in the film's world. In it we learn that Truman, the main character of the film and the television show within the film, was a baby adopted by a television production company, and he has since spent his life as the oblivious star of a 24-hour television show. Just about everything he does is recorded surreptitiously by hidden cameras, filtered through a production team covering it like a live event, and broadcast live to the world. The town of Seahaven, in which Truman has spent his entire life, is actually a massive and elaborate studio set disguised to look and feel like an idyllic island town. All the people Truman encounters in his life are hired actors. Within the diegesis, the television show is presented as something like a hybrid of a reality show and soap-opera as it ostensibly depicts a non-performing, non-fictional protagonist within an otherwise

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[22] Sconce Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Duke University Press, 2000), 168. That is, the film fails to reveal reality is equally constructed. See for example Kevin H Martin, "The Truman Show: The Unreal World," *Cinefex* 75 (1998); Jonathan Romney, "The New Paranoia: Games Pixels Play," *Film Comment* 34, no. 6 (1998).

[23] Knox, "Reading the Truman Show inside Out," 11.

[24] In regards to video games and "layers," Galloway in particular refers to the various intensities of agitation between the various layers of the game itself." Galloway, *Gaming Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, 36. This point is deftly expounded upon by Kirkpatrick's connection between video games and aesthetics in a way that resonates with the connections I am making here. See Kirkpatrick, *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game*, 62-63. Neither of the thinkers are as set on the "narrative" qualifier, however this is one I will relate to fictionality and realism later in this chapter.

fictional world. The plot of the film involves Truman becoming increasingly aware that his world is artificial, and the final act of the film depicts a battle of wills between Truman and the creator/director of his world, Christof, as Truman attempts to discover or escape the forces that have kept him complacent.

One of *The Truman Show's* shrewdest feats is how the film manages to position the spectator in relation to both of its diegetic worlds right from the outset. In writer Andrew Niccol's shooting script for the film, the film spectator's knowledge about Seahaven's artifice remains closely tied to Truman's perspective, which means the spectator only becomes aware of the multiple diegesis when Truman does.[25] In this way, Niccol's script is plotted more akin to other films of the era also notable because the protagonist is often unknowingly in a "virtual world." Specifically in *The Matrix* (The Wachowskis, 1999), *Vanilla Sky* (Cameron Crowe, 2003), *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, 1998), *eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg, 1999), and *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoven, 1990), the spectator's vantage point is fairly closely aligned with the protagonist's perspective, and this allows the revelation of an artificial world to provide a plot-twist for the film spectator.[26] By diverging from this strategy, and immediately revealing that Seahaven is a fictional world to everyone besides Truman, *The Truman Show* fosters a more nuanced and layered spectatorial experience compared with these other film examples because it asks the spectator to maintain somewhat incongruent positions simultaneously.

To understand how *The Truman Show* orients the spectator in relation to the film's worlds, it helps to look closely at the opening of the film. Within an impressively economical opening sequence lasting a little over two minutes, *The Truman Show* establishes its multiple diegetic layers in rather subtle manner, which nonetheless conveys a tremendous amount of information. To begin

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[25] Niccol, Andrew. "The Truman Show (Shooting Script)". http://www.movie-scripts.net, 1998.
[26] Knox makes a version of this point: "*The Truman Show* differs from predecessors such as Philip K. Dick's novel *Time Out of Joint* or films like *Total Recall* (1990) in that it does not ask its audience to work out (along with the protagonist) that things are not quite as they seem." Knox, "Reading the Truman Show inside Out," 9.

with, the film forgoes an opening-credit sequence, and instead cuts immediately from the Paramount Pictures logo—which here is shown without any accompanying sound, minimizing our cognizance of it as film—to a close-up of a face staring directly at the camera (Figure 3.1-A).

Figure 3.1-A. *The Truman Show*'s **opening shot.**

While direct address is somewhat atypical in mainstream fictional films, this shot here is also coded as a televisual recording through a few subtle visual and aural cues: the resolution and colors are more reminiscent of video quality than of a 35mm print; the depth of field is flattened to seem almost two dimensional; the character's head is only partially visible in frame, in a manner that subtly implies that a televisual ratio of the era (4:3) is being forced into a wider aspect ratio more associated with cinema; finally, the sound is somewhat degraded, indicating it is a secondary recording. This suggests that the film spectator's view into the diegetic world is mediated by another screen, likely a screen that exists within the first-order diegesis—a suggestion later confirmed when this composition is repeated within the context of a television interview an hour into the film. Consequently, this moment is less of an instance where a character or narrator breaks "the fourth

wall" to address the film spectators (e.g. Alfie talking to the film spectator in *Alfie* [Lewis Gilbert,

1966])), and more an instance of the conventional use of a news broadcast, something of a common

strategy for providing exposition in fictional films. Still, without a preceding shot clearly to put this

shot in context, on an initial viewing this shot certainly blurs the line between the diegetic and non-

diegetic narration. In this way, the opening shot foreshadows *The Truman Show's* almost duplicitous

concern for drawing spectator's attention to the narration within the diegesis, while also

surreptitiously relying on parallel, more conventional narration conventions in relaying the story.

As the opening sequence continues, the sense of a mediated diegesis continues to be

extended. In the second shot, the film cuts to an extreme close-up of a pair of eyes (Figure 3.1-B),

here seen through blur of low-resolution and interlaced horizontal lines once again signaling that the

image the spectator sees is a depiction of a diegetic screen. The perspective swiftly zooms out to

reveal that the filmic spectator has been watching a close-up of another screen, this one seemingly

built in to a wall, indicating a screen not usually found in a person's home (Figure 3.1-C). In the

lower right corner of the diegetic screen, the word "LIVE" fades into view in a font evoking the

late'90s notion of the "digital" (perhaps because of an association with digital clocks).
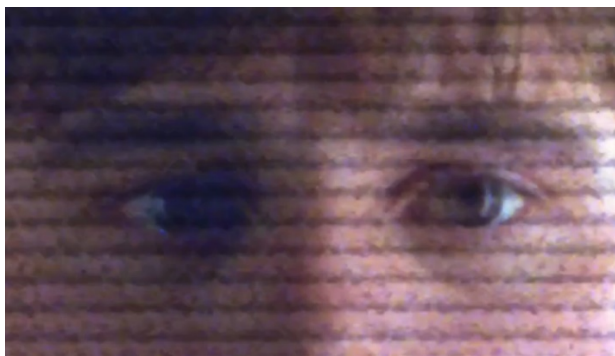
Figure 3.1-B. *The Truman Show's* **second shot,**
immediately after the cut.

Figure 3.1-C. The second shot after zooming out

The implied layers within this shot are quite astounding: we see a man (Truman) staring at himself in

a bathroom mirror—suggested by the barrier of cosmetics and the trappings of bathroom interior

design—yet he is also unknowingly staring at a diegetic hidden camera behind the glass, which is

being watched by a diegetic television production team and being broadcasted, so that, by extension, Truman is also staring at a diegetic televisual audience, and then, us, the extra-diegetic film spectator.

The next shot seemingly ends the "cold open" (or pre-credit sequence) by ostensibly beginning the film's titles, yet even this moment reinforces the diegetic layers. The first intertitle states "starring Truman Burbank as himself," as if the person we just saw is "Truman Burbank" and not the instantly recognizable actor Jim Carrey. The film has replaced the conventional non-diegetic opening credits with what is essentially a *diegetic* credit sequence; we are watching the credits for the fictional television show rather than the film. For the moment, the address places the film spectator within the diegesis, watching the credits for a diegetic television show.

One of the film's primary feats is positioning the film's diegetic layers relationally, where the fictional Seahaven is couched as a fictional world that exists within the primary diegesis of *The Truman Show*. This idea is foregrounded in the film's opening dialogue, which Christof provides during the opening shot:

> *We've become bored with watching actors giving us phony emotions; we're tired of pyrotechnics and special effects. While the world he inhabits is in some respects counterfeit, there's nothing fake about Truman himself. No scripts, no cue cards. It isn't always Shakespeare, but it's genuine. It's a life.*

The statement and its platitudes are teeming with irony. We, the film spectators, are about to watch a film filled with the "phony emotions," "special effects," and "scripts," which is exactly what is being undermined. However, because of the way the film situates Seahaven relatively as second-tier diegesis, Christof's statement *is* effectively true in his world. Our suspension of disbelief as spectators must somehow include the notion that Carrey's Truman is not part of the scripted production. This allows the larger diegesis to remain the relative "real" world in comparison to the false television world of Seahaven.

In fact, the film's primary tactic for generating humor lies in the dramatic irony between how we, the film audience, see Seahaven, and how Truman sees Seahaven. We are constantly reminded that Seahaven is a charade, and this knowledge permits us to recognize the farcical measures used to keep Truman compliant and complacent enough so as not to exceed the literal and metaphorical boundaries of Seahaven. The exaggerated propaganda Truman encounters discouraging him from leaving his hometown includes the newspaper's headlines that the town was "Voted the Best Place on Earth;" the posters in the travel agency warning travelers of potential "terrorists," "disease," "wild animals," and "street gangs" elsewhere; and Seahaven's television airing of the imaginary "classic" film, *Show Me the Way to Go Home*, that comes with the preamble describing it as "hymn of praise to small-town life." As film spectators, we can snicker at the sheer artlessness of these contrivances because the measures taken by the television production to keep Truman from wanting to leave Seahaven are comically unsubtle. Effectively we see them as poorly disguised diegetic narration, but to Truman—at least in the first half of the film, this narration is ostensibly invisible. He has no reason to see his world as an artifact, as a cultural object designed with some sense of intentionality, so he has no frame of reference to see Seahaven as narrated. What in fictional realism functions as invisible narration, for Truman is merely "real." The film spectator, meanwhile, is granted knowledge, not only that Seahaven is a cultural object designed with purpose, but also that one of its creator's aims is to continue to conceal this fact from Truman.

While it may seem, then, that the film spectator's perspective is aligned with the diegetic TV audience who is shown watching "The Truman Show," on many occasions film spectators actually shift between the diegetic layers, thus inhabiting distinct positions in relation to the film's worlds. One illustrative example comes from an early occasion when the film momentarily exits Seahaven and the televisual address, and provides a view into the larger diegesis. It is a transition that occurs so quickly that one could easily overlook it. But, following Gombrich's advice to "watch ourselves in

our reaction" and look at the "slow-motion picture of the mechanism that jumps into action whenever we search for the meaning of an image," we find a tremendously complicated set of relations at work here. In the first shot of the sequence (

Figure 03.1-D [shot 1]), we, the film spectators, see Truman through medium-long barrier shot, looking longingly at a sweater he is holding. The film then cuts to a close-up of two bartenders looking off-screen (

Figure 03.1-E. Shot 2 of the sequence

[shot 2]), as one of them leans in and asks, "What's he doing?"—a question the film spectator is likely asking as well. The status of these bartenders is not made clear until the next shot (Figure 3.1-F [shot 3-a]), which provides an eyeline match with a television displaying a diegetically-mediated version of shot 1. By this point, we understand that the bartenders are those who watch "The Truman Show" on television. As the shot continues (Figure 3.1-G [shot 3-b]), the image of Truman on the television then dissolves through a cliché ripple effect, signifying a dream or memory sequence, to (Figure 3.1-H [shot 3-c]) an establishing shot of a school and a younger looking Truman looking off-screen. The next shot (Figure 3.1-I [shot 4]), returns to the non-mediated televisual address, where the film's address is once again synced the television show broadcast of "The Truman Show." This provides the match to Truman's off-screen glance with a point-of-view long shot of a girl sitting in the grass. The final shot (Figure 3.2-A[shot 5]) closes out the point-of-view sequence by essentially repeating a version of shot 3-C, although without the television screen mediating the view.

Figure 3.1-D. Shot 1 of the sequence

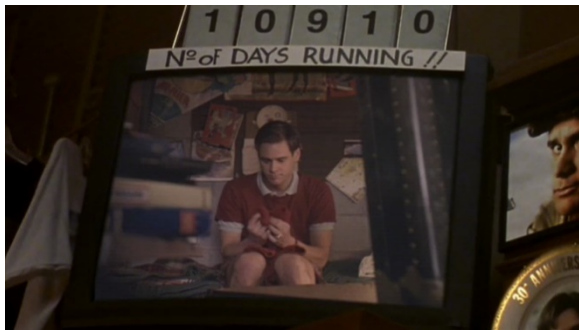**Figure 3.1-E. Shot 2 of the sequence**
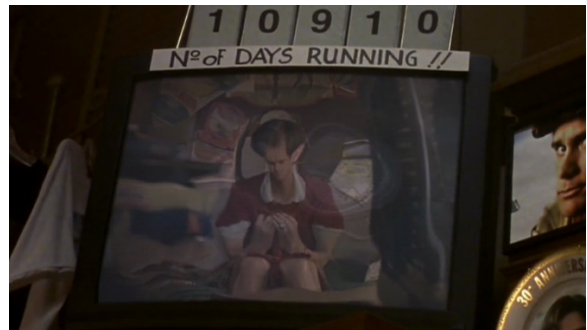

Figure 3.1-F. Shot 3-a of the sequence

Figure 3.1-G. Shot 3-b continued

Figure 3.1-H. Shot 3-c continued

Figure 3.1-I. Shot 4 of the sequence

Figure 3.1-J. Shot 5 of the sequence

Within this relatively short transitional sequence, the film's address quickly shifts from inside Seahaven to the primary diegetic world and then back to Seahaven (now as a flashback of Truman's college years). As the film moves between these layers, it also effectively repositions the film spectators in relation to the images and worlds presented. Part of what makes this such an interesting feat is how these transitions occur across two rather extraordinary versions of the conventional "shot/reverse-shot" arrangement. Shot 1 begins in the televisual address displaying Seahaven, signaled by the surveillance qualities of the barrier shot onto Truman. At this point, the spectator is subtly aware of the camera's diegetic presence as it watches Truman. However, in Shot 2, when we see the waitresses who are looking up at the television, the camera's diegetic presence evaporates because we are now located in the primary diegetic world. Shot 3 provides a reverse angle on the waitresses' gaze, aligning the film spectator with the point-of-view of those waitresses watching the diegetic television. What we implicitly discover is that the reverse-shot is also a version of the televisual address from shot 1, however now this address is contextualized within the primary diegetic world on the television screen, and what was previously the implied mediation of the televisual address becomes situated in the primary diegetic world. In shots 3-c, 4, and 5, the narration is returned to Seahaven, through mirrored inverse of the previous shot/reverse shot arrangement. In fact, technically these shots even share shot 3, although this must also recognize that there is a diegetic edit on the television screen in shot 3b.

Part of what makes this so extraordinary is how, as a block, shots 1, 2, and 3-a provide an unusual variation on the archetypical "suturing" associated with the shot/reverse shot arrangement. In theory, suturing is about positing the spectator in the film's world through a reverse angle, which

resolves the (unconscious) tension of off-screen space through the illusion of a complete world.[1]

However, the reverse-angle here does not provide a shot located inside Seahaven, but instead, pulls

the spectator into another layer altogether. At the same time, the spectator may be "sutured" into

the primary diegesis in the sense that the offscreen point-of-view of the television becomes located

in this primary diegesis, even as we remain somewhat unresolved in relation to Seahaven. We believe

Seahaven exists, but only as an artificial construct within the primary diegesis. Meanwhile, shots 3b,

4 and 5, provide us with a classic point-of-view shot using Truman in Seahaven, which in theory

would provide another instance of suturing, this time in Seahaven. Perhaps, though, it has become

impossible to disremember the level of mediation that remains between us and Truman's world.

Further, not only is Seahaven still an artificial world, but the Seahaven we return to in shots 4 and 5

contains another layer of mediation because the flashback Seahaven is no longer "live." Whereas

the previous views of Truman were meant to feel "present-tense," evoking a sense of contingency

and mundanity, the "past-tense" flashback-Seahaven is a clearly edited sequence jumping across

swaths of time. In this sense, it is easier to recognize the calculated mission of the narration to

communicate a functional component of Truman's motivation (perhaps it is something like a reality

show's "previously on…" roll in montage feeling markedly different than the show itself).

Another indication of the complex dynamics operating in this transition can be

demonstrated with an analysis of how the flashback is signaled to the audience. In contrast to an

earlier scene's more understated flashback showing Truman's father's ostensible drowning, this

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[1] Jean-Pierre Oudart and Kaja Silverman adopted and popularized the term "suturing" in theories of spectatorship. The term, taken from Lacan, is read into the formal construction of narrative of cinematic spectatorship by way of a close semiotic and psychoanalytic reading. See Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Cinema and Suture Jean-Pierre Oudart," (1977). Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). in the sense that suturing involves various dialectics for the spectator—presence and absence, agency and lack of agency, identification and alienation, panic and reassurance—with the final result of the spectator remedying all the gaps between these tensions through an unconscious participation in the construction of the narrative world as one that should be whole.

second flashback lacks any subtlety. In shot 3-b, the ripples on the television (along with the preceding dialogue), indicate that the television broadcast of "The Truman Show" is using a non-diegetic queue to indicate that it is supplementing its live feed of Truman with additional expository narration; "The Truman Show" is providing relevant backstory with a prepared and edited montage of clips from the show's past. For one thing, it is a way for *The Truman Show* film to provide the relevant exposition to the film audience about what Truman is doing. However, instead of taking ownership of a trite and clunky use of a flashback as means to provide exposition, *The Truman Show* attributes this decision to the television production of "The Truman Show." For the film spectator, the trite artifice of the ripples provides a hackneyed cliché, but within the diegesis, the television audience seems to take no notice. The diegetic television address is willing to suspend their disbelief in relation Seahaven in a way that we as film spectators are never quite asked to do. Instead, we can view the television audiences as naïve spectators in their obliviousness to the mediation the televisual broadcast.[2]

Part of what *The Truman Show* demonstrates in these transitions between diegetic layers, is the ease with which spectators can engage with the film's very different registers. As the film nimbly moves between its worlds, the spectator is positioned both inside and outside the worlds of the film, sutured and un-sutured. When the film portends to show Seahaven through its representation of the televisual narration, the spectator occupies a more distant position. The narration is itself part of the theatrical performance, so the spectator can view the seams that hold Seahaven together. This role finds spectators on some level aware of the mediating intentionality behind the image, an authorial expression that intends to shape how meaning is apprehended by the diegetic television audience.

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[2] In the eventual confrontation between Truman and Christof taking place during *The Truman Show's* final scene, Truman asserts his definitive independence by claiming that Christoph "never had a camera in [Truman's] head." This flashback sequence depicting Truman's memories, demonstrates that the television production effectively *did* have a camera in Truman's head.

When the narration leaves Seahaven, the primary diegetic world is presented in a more conventional manner and the mostly invisible cinematic narration places us back into a more typical mode of spectatorship associated with realism. Yet, the fact that the movie balances these modes in parallel, and that they do not seem to disrupt each other, provides insight into how the fictional narratives worlds within film can be understood more like the play-spaces of video games.

3.1.3 Dual Engagement and Ludic Space

The Truman Show's propensity to address the film spectator both outside and inside the film's world corresponds to the last chapter's observation that, when we *play* narrative video games, we engage the game worlds both from inside as participants and from the outside as co-narrators.[3] When the film uses the televisual address, the reflexivity acknowledges the spectator's presence outside the fictional world, as the spectator scrutinizes Seahaven's design as a manufactured environment. This corresponds with video games' non-diegetic address that implicitly acknowledges the player as a text, an operational co-narrator needed to propel the game's expression from outside the game world. In video games, this will be often used to impart operational or expositional information to the player, perhaps the health of a character, the correct route through a maze, or a particular mission's objectives. Within this mode, players are not "sutured" into the world of the game, as they remain somewhat cognizant of the world as a construct. Alternatively, when *The Truman Show* leaves Seahaven and effectively obscures its narration, the film operates in a more conventional narration

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[3] One way to recall this idea is through the opening moments from the narrative game *Portal 2* (Valve, 2011), which provides as succinct an example as any. The game opens in the first-person perspective as the player's character seemingly wakes up in a locked motel room. Moments later, an unidentifiable robotic-sounding voice is broadcast over a diegetic intercom, and it orders the character to look "to look up at the ceiling," apparently as part of the protagonist's regimented exercise routine. Almost concurrently, a non-diegetic cue appears on screen, superimposed over the diegetic world, instructing the player to provide the extra-diegetic physical action that will translate into the character looking up at the ceiling. Functionally *Portal 2*'s non-diegetic and diegetic narration are oriented to the player's perspective.

where the mediating frame effectively disappears, and spectators are drawn into the diegetic world with a more classically suturing address. This corresponds to when video games' diegetic address deliberately conceals its awareness of the player's presence by effectively embedding the narration into the game world. It asks players to make believe the world they are experiencing is real and that they are subjects in that world, often conflating the player's perspective with that of a character, avatar, or some other diegetic representative. Video game play is partly about a constant interplay and negotiation between these two addresses, as games work to draw the player into the narrative worlds, but also rely on an active spectator to engage the fictional world by performing actions in player's own world.

What makes *The Truman Show* unusual is not that it contains these addresses, but how the film layers them in parallel to each other, something connected to Knox' observation of the "co-presence" of the filmic and televisual modes. This is significant because of how the modes of address/spectatorial positions correspond with a familiar critical binary: the diegetic address positioning the spectator inside the fictional world is aligned with realism, while the non-diegetic address positioning the spectator outside the fictional world is aligned with reflexivity.[4] Often realism and reflexivity are associated with oppositional modes of reception. Realism's tendency to hide the narration and minimize the viewer's awareness of the production through seamlessness is linked with ideologically-suspect concepts like "immersion," "illusionism," and "absorption." Reflexivity, on the other hand, draws attention to the narration, breaking the illusion of the film's world by keeping the spectator at a distance. Consequently, reflexivity—especially when paired with modernism—is often considered more critically progressive, linked to the avant-garde, and associated with concepts like "distanciation," "theatricality," and "demystification." Another

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[4] Depending on one's critical framework, this conception of "reflexivity" could be associated with either "modernism" or "postmodernism." Regardless, it is understood in opposition to realism's tendency toward immersion.

ostensible facet of this opposition is that diegetic realism pretends the fictional world exists on its own, while non-diegetic reflexivity acknowledges the world as a fictional construct.

While playing narrative video games, however, we are seemingly engaged in both modes in parallel, enabling us to *play* both *in* and *with* the game world at once. This idea seems related to Manovich's notion of "meta-realism" which he explains as something which "incorporates its own critique inside itself…[as it] it continuously and skillfully deconstructs itself…" For Manovich though this a model that is common—or perhaps even ubiquitous—in new media forms like video games because of how illusionism works differently in new media. As he explains, "new media objects keep reminding us about their artificiality, incompleteness, and constructedness [by] present[ing] us with a perfect illusion only to reveal the underlying machinery next." For Manovich, these media provide users with additional agency. As he notes, "as the user navigates through space the objects switch back and forth between pale blueprints and fully fleshed out illusions. The immobility of a subject guarantees a complete illusion; the slightest movement destroys it."[5] In this characterization, "meta-realism" in video games is effectively a product of the popular conception of the discord between immersion and interactivity, the assumption that full-fledged "immersion" is inherently beyond a form oriented toward the interactive perceiver.[6]

Yet, where Manovich ostensibly connected this meta-realism to the material conditions of computational forms and responsive interfaces like video games, *The Truman Show* demonstrates how films too can engender something quite comparable despite a more non-responsive form. Moreover, *The Truman Show's* correspondence with video games helps articulate how "meta-realism," and its

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[5] Manovich, *Language*, 185-6.

[6] For more on this idea, we would look to Janet Murray and her discussion of the "holodeck" from *Star Trek The Next Generation*, where the virtual experience is sensually indistinguishable from a real-world experience. The point to remember though is that when it comes to the holodeck, the participant is, on some level, cognitively aware that they are participating in a fictional space. Janet Horowitz Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck : The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

parallel modes of inside and outside receptive positions, are really about approaching the fictional world as a designed *play-space*. To explore this idea, it is imperative to recognize narrative realism's specific affinity with ludic spaces.

To begin, it is helpful to recognize the confluence between Bordwell's notion of aesthetic perception and Huizinga's concept of *(game)play*. Specifically, Bordwell's argument that "what […] distinguishes aesthetic perception and cognition from the non-aesthetic variety" is the supposition that "aesthetic activity" has "nonpractical ends,"[7] sounds remarkably similar to Huizinga's definition of "play":

> *We might call [play] a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly, it is an activity connected with no material interest and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds with its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner.[8]*

For these thinkers, *gameplay* and aesthetic reception are, respectively, modes of experience that can be at once distinguished and partitioned from the real world, yet can also be taken earnestly in their own right. The game world and the fictional world exist in spaces that have tenuous consequential relationships to the real world, yet we can also be absorbed into these worlds and treat them *as if* their consequences matter. That is to say, the aesthetic experience and *gameplay* exist in a sub-world.

Significantly, we find several complementary formulations of alternate worlds being utilized by theorists thinking about ludic and aesthetic reception.[9] Caillois, for one, describes a mode of *gameplay* associated with his category of *mimicry* (simulation) as a an engagement that "presupposes

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[7] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 32. Of course, deciding what is "practical" and "not-practical," is based on subjective, contextual, and social factors as opposed to quantifiable material qualities. Consequently, the same object can be experienced both as practical and non-practical—art and design, fiction and reality—depending on the vantage point one takes and how it presents itself. The non-practical is that which is not "real" because it has no consequences. This is consistent with the last chapter's discussion of design and art objects being distinguished by the perception of functionality.

[8] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens; a Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, 12.

[9] The most complete scholarly work combining these the ludic and aesthetic in terms of world-building and make-believe has been done by Kendall Walton. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. Surprisingly, Walton does not connect his work or cite to Huizinga or Caillois in this work.

the temporary acceptance…of a closed, conventional, and in certain respects, imaginary universe."[10]

In Michael Fried's description of being absorbed by a painting, we find a similar idea of a "closed" world: "the world of the painting appear[s] self-sufficient, autonomous, a closed system independent of and, in that sense blind to the world of the beholder." For Fried, this creation of a world is what engenders a "virtual trance of imaginative involvement" for the spectator,[11] a phrase which sounds remarkably like those found in Caillois and Huizinga.

However, it is Frederic Jameson who specifically links the world-building capacity of fiction to realism—a point we touched on at the end of Chapter 2. Jameson describes what he calls the "demiurgic praxis" within literature where…

> *realism and its specific narrative forms construct their new world by programming their reader; by training them in their new habits and practices, which amount to whole new subject positions in a new kind of space; producing new kinds of action, but by way of the production of new categories of the event and of experience, of temporality and causality, which also preside over what will now be come to be thought of as reality.*[12]

Jameson's statement is especially helpful because it brings us back to a recognition of how texts strategically build their worlds using formal techniques. In the previous chapter we discussed this in terms of interactive design, which makes sense considering his use of the word "programming" evokes computer software with outward facing interfaces. We know that software like video games include worlds that are literally programmed, but Jameson is explaining how this is a standard function of "specific narrative forms" related to realism. All fictional worlds must not only be built, but programmed in a way that they can be experienced in a particular way by a perceiver. The design

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[10] Caillois and Barash, *Man, Play, and Games*, 19.

[11] Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 48. It is worth noting Richard Rushton's insightful distinction between absorption and immersion. Rushton argues that the "mode of absorption is one in which the spectator goes into the film – that is, is absorbed in or by the film – whereas in the mode of immersion the film comes out to the spectator so as to surround and envelop her/him."

[12] Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, 166. My Italics.

of these worlds is oriented toward how they will be eventually navigated. They are imaginary spaces

that are, in a sense, designed to be inhabited and acted upon (in a cognitive/perceptual sense).

As spectators and players, even as we may navigate these worlds from within, we do not

mistake this experience for what we understand as reality. This is because both *gameplay* and aesthetic

reception are defined by our implicit awareness that these experiences are not real, that we remain

outside the fictional worlds. Jameson makes a version of this point when he explains that the

fictional world of realism must "be grasped as a *false* world, …one which is objectively false."[13] The

tacit recognition that the fictional world is not our world is—perhaps counterintuitively—a

requirement in a work of realism. If we apprehend the world as *real, historical,* or non-fictional—a

notion we will continue to explore in Chapter 4—this would no longer be gameplay or aesthetic

reception. This is why we find a similar prerequisite for a tacit cognitive dissonance in Caillois'

notion of the mimicry (simulation) playing "make-believe"—even watching others playing make-

believe. Caillois describes it as submitting to a "spell," "illusion," and an "artifice which for a given

time [one] is asked to believe in as more real than reality itself."[14] There is an "ask" before the leap

of faith, allowing the player to, on some level, knowingly submit. Whether playing a narrative game

or watching a narrative film, there is an inferred contract that allows the spectator to experience and

play with/in these imaginary worlds by first recognizing that they are designed.

In significant ways, this idea is essentially found in Coleridge's foundational "willing

suspension of disbelief," which similarly defines the contract of a serious engagement with any

imagined world. In the interest of creating a coherent world, then, it would seem advisable for

narration not to draw too much attention to this outside presence and the tacit contract. This could

be said to aid any suspension of disbelief. When we watch a film in a mode of realism and treat the

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[13] Ibid., 167.
[14] Caillois and Barash, *Man, Play, and Games*, 23.

diegetic world as if it exists, we are, in a sense, willingly playing a game of make-believe. The audience must relinquish the logic that governs everyday reality, but the fiction must also present a world that is coherent and plausible enough to be experienced as "real". We willingly suspend our disbelief and affectively experience these worlds as coherent, yet the spell is always in danger of being broken because our disbelief only stretches so far. The point is that the relative fragility of the fictional world recognizes the ever-presence of the outside, conscious mode of engagement that looms over the diegesis even in work of realism. Consequently, while the basic positions inside and outside a fictional world may be implicit in realism, the style only functions uninterrupted by suppressing spectators cognizance of their position outside the fictional world. If this is in fact the case, though, how do beholders reclaim their position outside the fictional world and become conscious of a worlds' design?

Part of what makes *The Truman Show* such a productive film to examine in relation to the reception of narrative worlds is that the central story provides a kind of thought-experiment about a subject unknowingly navigating a carefully authored world. In one sense, Truman provides a parable about a (video) game player so fully immersed in a game world that the player is unaware he or she is even playing a game. In another sense, Truman is akin to a fully sutured film spectator who mistakes the fictional world for reality. In this way, the film asks us to consider a hypothetical where a diegetic world is apprehended either as a non-diegetic world, a mediated perspective comprehended as unmediated, an intentional object is mistaken as unintentional, or a game mistaken for reality. Perhaps more importantly, then, *The Truman Show* imagines the process by which subjects become conscious of the narrational addresses that shape their orientation and perception.

3.2 LEARNING TO PLAY, PLAYING TO LEARN

3.2.1 (Re)Cognizing the Glitch

When we, as spectators, watch *The Truman Show*, we implicitly recognize the primary diegesis as *a*

world that, in some sense, exists as an imaginary construct in *our* world. Our entire register of

engagement is premised on our position outside the diegesis that recognizes the fictional world as

fiction, rendering the experiences within that world to be non-functional, non-practical, and non-

serious. [15] This allows us to see how Seahaven operates by distinct rules compared to the rules of the

primary diegetic world, just as the rules of the primary diegetic world operates differently from the

rules of our own world (e.g. our world does not allow a corporation to adopt a baby and

surreptitiously film that baby's life). At the same time, we are implicitly judging the sub-worlds based

on frames of reference outside that world. At most, the fictional world has a tangential,

representational or metaphorical link to the world it exists in.

Because Truman has only existed within Seahaven, he is unlike the film spectator or the

game player because Truman has never submitted to a willing suspension of disbelief. For Truman,

Seahaven is *the* world, and what happens in Seahaven has practical implications. The point is that

Truman is not unwilling to suspend disbelief, but he is oblivious to alternative set of rules. Christof

explains the principle behind this idea when he explains why Truman never questioned the

authenticity of Seahaven: "we accept the reality of the world with which we are presented." Since

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[15] As mentioned in the previous section, a key part of Bordwell's notion of the aesthetic experience is that baseline assumption that the encounter lacks a practical application in the real world; that is, we must recognize the experience as "not-practical." Likewise, for Huizinga, something can only truly be considered "play" if we know that it is "not-serious." However, considering last chapter's discussion of "functionality" as the determining factor of "art" and "design," we should also recognize that neither "practicality" nor "seriousness" are inherent to the object encountered; they are receptive positions based on subjective factors, which are also shaped by social contexts and discursive norms.

Truman has no frame of reference outside of Seahaven, he has no ability and also no cause to question his world as it is.

Crucially, Christof's logic also articulates a certain characterization of naïve film spectatorship in relation to a fictional world, such as the primary diegetic world of *The Truman Show*. In this mode of engagement, spectators implicitly agree to a premise when encountering a fictional world that is presented as coherent through a concealed narration. Presumably, as long as the film remains within the bounds of conventional plausibility, spectators have no drive to begin pulling at its seams. In the same way that Truman has no cause to consider the events of his life as orchestrated decisions shaping his perspective, naïve spectators will theoretically remain oblivious to the narrational choices made in the expression of this fictional world. Put another way, the spectator is unaware of the syntagmatic axis. For *The Truman Show's* spectators, though, this obliviousness does not extend to our view of Seahaven, which is why even the naïve spectator can remain conscious of the choices made in crafting Seahaven. In this way, the process by which Truman becomes aware of the mediated address, and essentially begins to close the gap between the filmic spectator's perception of the manufactured Seahaven and Truman's own perception, is essentially an account of how one manages to become conscious of a world's narration from inside that world rather than relying on the external vantage point.

The first event of the film that demonstrates Truman questioning his world arises when his morning routine is interrupted by an ostensible aberration. As he is getting into his car, a television studio lamp falls out of the empty blue sky, crashing right next to Truman. Truman then looks up and off-screen towards the sky where it fell from, and the film provides a reverse-shot depicting what is ostensibly Truman's point-of-view. Knox interprets this point-of-view shot to "suggest for the first time that Truman is becoming conscious of another level to his world, that the periphery of

his vision might contain a thus far denied presence." The point-of-view shot and Truman's reaction,

signal that this is something that potentially challenges the objective quality of his world. Certainly,

Knox's reading works within the context of where the narrative is headed and the film spectator's

awareness of the television show, however it is worth considering that, in theory, Truman has no

frame of reference to make such an interpretation. What we do know is that Truman sees this as

happening as a deviation from normality because it lacks clear casual motivation and it is the first of

several incidents in the film that ostensibly breaks the internal rules of Seahaven. In the beginning of

The Truman Show, we see Truman encountering aberrations ostensibly without effort—the light falls

from the sky in front of him, his car radio suddenly broadcasts the production staff's signal, a rain

storm momentarily localizes around his body, and his "dead" father attempts to sneak back on set.

While the film spectator can recognize these as (diegetic) setbacks within the film, Truman's is

initially unsure what to make of them. In Truman's words "a lot of strange things have been

happening."

 To Knox, this series of events was, in some ways, inevitable because "every system,

especially as big an operation as 'The Truman Show,' is likely to have glitches that come with the

territory."[16] There is no indication that Knox's use of "glitches" is intended to allude to the jargon of

computer programming, however her use of the term is apt precisely for this reason. As a neologism

of the computer-age popularized as astronaut slang for unexpected malfunctions, the term "glitch"

already carries a connotation of an unforeseeable malfunction in complex technical system.[17] It is

something that arises in part because of the sheer number of variables in a network of interrelated

protocols working together. In video games culture, what players refer to glitches when playing a

game can vary significantly in terms of the degree of disruption a glitch causes and how it

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[16]Knox, "Reading the Truman Show inside Out," 7.

[17] Oxford English Dictionary, *"Glitch, N."* (Oxford University Press).

manifests.[18] Some glitches can be predictable and repeatedly triggered under specific conditions, but other glitches are not easily replicated, or possibly even wholly anomalous. A minor glitch might manifest as missing texture on a wall and the player's flow of operating in a game world may not be interrupted. In a sense, these minor glitches are akin to "continuity errors" in film, which may go unnoticed if not egregious. At the same time, a significant glitch, perhaps a "game breaking glitch" will render a game inoperable, perhaps causing the program to suddenly crash and lose stored data.[19]

Even though many glitches occurring in video games can be overlooked or ignored, we could say that every recognized glitch carries the potential to change the player's orientation toward the game world. For one thing, by definition the glitch presupposes that a plan—a purposeful design, an intended order —has gone awry. For Truman, each glitch can be evidence that the world he took for granted as given is, in fact, designed. It is an aberration, a break from a pattern, an unexpected mutation, that provides the potential to ascertain a greater purposive scheme through that scheme's breakdown. If the glitch is a moment when an ordered system confesses its imperfect construction, that confession must be heard.

When we read the aberration as glitch, it means that we have acknowledged the larger design of the system, and we recognize that the system's design has exceeded the designer's control. For Truman, to see an occurrence as a glitch would mean that he already comprehends his world as one that operates according to an authored mechanism. While every glitch can provide a momentary

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[18] Eben Holmes gives a helpful explanation of the glitch: "glitch—the spectral appearance of failure in the virtual worlds of computers, cyberspace and videogames in which paradoxes and extremities of distance, geometry, velocity and shadow fold in on a single object/surface/function in the world until it—like Marx's table—becomes a Thing." Eben Holmes, "Strange Reality: Glitches and Uncanny Play," *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 4, no. 2 (2010): 255-56.

[19] In the sense that the glitches are understood as design flaws, glitches are closely related to "bugs" because both describe something that is ostensibly broken. Still, there is, perhaps, a slight if important distinction between a glitch and a bug. One way to understand might be that the glitch is the expression—the symptom or manifestation—of a bug. One *prevents* glitches by *fixing* bugs, glitches are, how bugs are experienced. Glitches are what is noticed or felt by the player, while bugs are what are identified by the developer as something that needs to be fixed. In this way, the bug describes a glitch once that glitch is diagnosed. The glitch manifests in the diegetic world, while the bug is the diagnosis from the extra-diegetic world.

glimpse of a larger invisible mechanism, one must also be able recognize the glitch as a malfunction. But how is Truman able to read these aberrations as glitches and not heretofore unknown features of his world. Perhaps if Seahaven lights can fall out of a cloudless sky, and rainstorms can be isolated over individuals, what allows Truman to see these events as something "strange"?

One proposition is that, for a given occurrence to be apprehended as a glitch and not a feature, it must both break continuity and lack a motivated, diegetic explanation. The fact that Truman can recognize these occurrences as "strange" means that Seahaven has developed conventions, rules that establish norms of what it possible and what is impossible. These are patterns that make certain events more or less probable. Whether or not Truman is aware that he has internalized these conventions, the fact that he can recognize things as strange, means he expects his world to operate within certain parameters. However, his unwilling suspension of disbelief is challenged when enough aberrations occur in proximity to one another that it changes Truman's orientation in his mode of perception. It is not that Truman comprehends the totality behind the constructed nature of Seahaven, but he enters into a more skeptical, investigatory mode of perception. He is no longer a wholly naïve spectator as he begins to experiment with a perception that sees the ostensibly random or coincidental, as purposeful.

One scene in particular provides a productive illustration of how Truman's perspective transforms as he ceases to passively wait for glitches and instead begins seeking them out. The scene starts with Truman taking an uncharacteristic break before heading to work, choosing instead to sit outside on a bench and observe the busy morning routine around him. A diegetic television camera filming the "The Truman Show" placed inside a car, audibly whirrs as it zooms-in to capture Truman looking off-screen (Figure 3.2-A), before the film cuts to a medium shot from Truman's point of view. This shot shows a man and woman eating at a nearby table (Figure 3.2-B), and then

cuts back to Truman looking (Figure 3.2-B), completing the point-of-view circuit. The pattern continues over the next few shots as Truman surveys his scene somewhat suspiciously, before ending in a close-up on Truman's eyes.

Figure 3.2-A. Truman looks off-screen

Figure 3.2-B. Truman's point of view.

Figure 3.2-C. Return to slightly zoomed in shot of Truman looking off-screen.

In another context, this three-shot series would be an almost entirely unremarkable. This brief point-of-view shot depicting people talking over breakfast might merely express the idea that Truman is looking around for *something*. Meanwhile, the idiosyncratic details of the extras, whose conversation

we momentarily catch a few words from ("l love that idea." "It's pretty cool, isn't it?"), would merely provide a bit of detail, perhaps adding a sense of depth to a world. On the other hand, through the film's diegetic layers and the implicit knowledge of Truman's skepticism, the sheer mundanity of the scene is part of what makes this significant. As Truman undergoes this transformation, he is effectively aligning his perspective with that of the filmic spectator in that he is becoming attuned to how Seahaven is filled with concealed narration. For the film spectator, these literal extras are also diegetic extras. We are aware that they serve a purpose within Seahaven's ruse and Truman also begins viewing the inane behavior as purposeful and intentional, a calculated performance aimed at his vantage point. In something of a twist on the typical point-of-view shot, it is Truman who essentially begins to identify with the film spectator's external perspective.

Following his examination of Seahaven's extras, the music swells and Truman walks into street traffic, raising his hands to stop cars, as if his actions, and not the drivers' actions are controlling the flow of traffic. Like a video game player who, upon stumbling across an initial glitch begins searching for more, we watch Truman enter a new mode of engagement with his environment. As in video game design, the world's limitations are hidden most efficiently when the freely-agentic subject can remain within predictable spaces. This is why the diegetic narrations behind Seahaven direct Truman to express his agency within the space it has previously allotted for him as often as possible through diegetic justifications—e.g. police restricting movement beyond a point because of toxic chemicals conceals the fact nothing exists beyond the horizon. Once Truman begins to believe that his world is purposefully designed, his aim is to discover his world's parameters by triggering glitches instead of merely waiting passively for glitches to occur. Searching for glitches is about actively testing the fictional space's fortitude and integrity, and the glitch is the point when the effort to conceal the artifice has failed.

An important part of Truman's recognition is not only that his world is a designed program, but also that it is particularly oriented towards his vantage point. The world he previously imagined as a self-sustaining and indifferent ecosystem, actually exists only in relation to his presence. In this same sequence, Truman unexpectedly forces his way into a random building and triggers a glitch—an elevator with a missing wall reveals the back stage of the studio (Figure 3.2-D). An ostensible elevator door opens and reveal the television show's backstage. As Truman watches dumbfounded, a production staff worker rushes to slide the false elevator wall back into place.

Figure 3.2-D Sequence in which Truman rushes unexpectedly into an office building.

Truman brief encounter with the back stage particularly recalls a phenomenon within video games where players discover a glitch that leads to their avatar "falling off the map." When this

occurs, the player has seemingly slipped by the environmental design's "collision" parameters—the rules defining how diegetic objects impede movement in space—into an area of the larger map not meant to be traversed. Just like in Seahaven, the video game world has limitations. To balance appearance and performance, video games are often designed in a way that allows their artificial worlds to be rendered piecemeal and in relation to the player's perspective. The supposition is that the only areas of the game world that need to be fully calculated by the computer at a given moment are those which the player sees or the avatar encounters. In video game design, the extent of what is "clipped" depends on how a game is designed, but usually this means that visual layers and the physical properties are rendered when they are deemed relevant to the player's avatar. One helpful illustration of this idea can be found within a "behind-the-scenes" featurette about the game *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017), which demonstrates how the visual components of the diegetic world essentially are only rendered in relation to the direction the player is looking. The illustration (Figure 3.2-E) shows the world not from the player's perspective (which is a close third-person in the game), but from a bird's-eye-view, the designer's perspective. Here the player's vantage point is represented by the nodal point at the bottom center of the frame, as the player essentially turns the avatar on its axis, the point-of-view pans, and the world's visuals render and de-render, accordingly. Only what the player is currently viewing, and some linked assets, are visually rendered at any moment.

Figure 3.2-E The diegetic world visually "exists" in reference to players' in-game perspective.

When Truman stumbles into a space that has not been rendered within his diegesis, he is like a video game player falling off the map and realizing the diegetic world only remains coherent from a certain perspective. Like a room on a soundstage, it exists through a framed vantage point.

In many video games, when the player's avatar enters a doorway to another location the game will cut to a loading screen, during which time the environment the player's avatar came from will stop being rendered, and the forthcoming environment will begin to be rendered. In video games wherein one can travel quickly through large navigable spaces without encountering loading screens players will often witness the environment essentially in the process of loading as the computer processes the level-design instructions from the game's code, and incrementally renders the environment in plain view of the player. Sometimes occurrences of this phenomenon are essentially experienced as glitches, because buildings or trees may appear so suddenly that the player's avatar may collide with a physical obstruction that only appears visually after the collision. So, when Truman stumbles backstage and into a section of Seahaven that has been "clipped," he witnesses the world rendering as they place the wall back into place. What previously appeared to be an "objectively false" world, in Jameson's terms, is revealed to be "some mere appearance or figment."[20] The realism is breaking down because the internal rules of the world are not detailed or dynamic enough. The design of the world did not anticipate the extent of how it would be navigated.

For seasoned video game players, *The Truman Show's* final scene provides a familiar illustration of limitations of fictional world design. In the scene, Truman is in a boat escaping Seahaven by sailing in what appears to be a sort of endless horizon. In a long shot, we see Truman's boat moving slowly from the left side of the frame toward the right side, the direction of the

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[20] Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, 167.

horizon, while a tempered piano score provides a hopeful air. The music suddenly stops as the boat

literally crashes into the horizon, which is revealed to be a painted backdrop. While Truman is

initially flummoxed when he reaches this previously invisible border, for video game players this

occurrence has a definite label: "hitting an invisible wall." Invisible walls are common occurrences in

video games that neglect to conceal their non-diegetic limitations within the diegetic world. When a

player manages to navigate to the end of the space designed to be navigable, the game's visual

representation can clash with the collision parameters. An open road or an expanse that appears to

continue on, functionally provides a dead end. Invisible walls are not glitches, per se; they are instead

decisive design concessions. Still, like glitches, they can interrupt the illusion of a world by revealing

the designer's hand, the constructed nature of the sub-world that is necessarily limited compared to

the primary world.[21]

Robert Buerkle notes that invisible walls "result from the discrepancy between the game's

systemic logic and its fictional logic. […] While the fictional world may be limitless, the gameworld is

decidedly finite."[22] While Buerkle is specifically referring to video games, a similar logic works for

film as well. What Buerkle calls the "gameworld" could just as easily describe any narrative diegetic

world as we experience it. That is, in film the diegetic world is similarly finite in the sense that

everything that does not appear within the narrative representation—everything left in Iser's terms

"indeterminate"—remains unrendered and undefined. The literal text is the "gameworld," which

creates parameters, but the fictional world remains limitless until we recognize those parameters. In

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[21] For game designers looking to avoid such moments of disenchantment, invisible walls can be avoided through diegetic justifications. That is, instead of reaching an invisible wall, players could reach an insurmountable concrete wall, one that is motivated by the architecture of the diegetic city. Or the game could let players know that the water they want to navigate is infested with sharks, so as soon as our avatar ventures out to a certain point, the sharks end the player's effort. It is worth noting how this demonstrates how diegetic decisions, and the ways the worlds are represented, might be influenced by efforts to conceal technical limitations. To oversimplify, open-world video games might be more likely to be set on islands to avoid explaining why character cannot simply travel elsewhere.

[22] Buerkle, *Of Worlds and Avatars: A Playercentric Approach to Videogame Discourse*, 141.

occurrences in video games, such as falling off the map or running into an invisible wall, the player is confronting the realization that the "off-screen" space of a diegetic world is only functionally rendered in our imaginations. This is not merely a metaphor or an analogy, but an understanding of how fictional, diegetic worlds are effectively produced in the beholder's imagination during the act of reception—in part, our willing suspension of disbelief renders the off-screen diegetic space.[23] This idea is even implied in Gombrich's and Bordwell's conceptions that an artwork only functionally exists as a projection in the spectator's imagination. Likewise, as it was presented to and experienced by Truman through most of the film, the off-screen spaces of Seahaven functionally exist despite never materially existing. When we hit an invisible wall, we are confronted not only by the narrational artifice, but our own role in rendering that off-screen space. Further, Buerkle notes that "if we wish to look, we could find countless examples of…discrepancies [like the invisible wall]."[24] If a player searches for discordance that reveals the narration embedded into the diegesis, it will be found repeatedly. What is taken for granted, however, is that video game play does actually relies on players to experiment and search for such discrepancies.

3.2.2 Critical Exploits

In video games, glitches can potentially be outlets for radical transformations, and the productive counterpart to the glitch is the *"exploit."* These are instances in which players use glitches as

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[23] V.F. Perkin's makes a version of this point in his argument that "the world is everything (in space and in time) surrounding and embedding our immediate perceptions. There is always an out-of-sight just as there is always an off-screen." VF Perkins, "Where Is the World? The Horizon of Events in Movie Fiction," in *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film*, ed. John Gibbs and Douglas Pye (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).
[24] Buerkle, *Of Worlds and Avatars: A Playercentric Approach to Videogame Discourse*, 141.

loopholes, and subvert the rules of the game without technically leaving the game's boundaries.[25]

Glitches may expose a video game's underlying construction, but exploits actively meddle with the

invisible parameters by finding new possibilities. If a player's avatar jumps over a wall and falls off

the map, this would be a glitch; if a player jumps over a wall to skip past challenges, this would be an

exploit. Often exploits are about finding ways to use the game's protocols in unintended and

counterintuitive ways. For instance, in a racing game like *Mariokart 64* (Nintendo, 1996), players have

figured out how to fall or jump at strategic locations in race courses to skip over large segments of

those courses. In another rather extreme example of an exploit, players discovered a way to

effectively rewrite the code of *Super Mario World* (Nintendo, 1990) through a series of diegetic

actions that take advantage of how the platform's processor allocates memory while computing the

game's code. This exploit allows players to effectively inject an entirely new set of rules into the

game, or even to create entirely new games using *Super Mario World* assets as a set of baseline

materials.[26] Regardless of the particular ends of any exploit, its presence suggests not only the

player's acknowledgement of a fictional world's design, but also the player's effort to challenge the

dominion of the game's designer as the sole definer of a game world's rules.[27]

To some extent, discovering or inventing exploits is simply an extension of how players

approach play-spaces as complex systems that are perpetually unresolved. Just like Knox's assertion

that glitches were inevitable because of Seahaven's enormity, Alex Galloway makes the point that

"hacks and other software exploits [inevitably] pop up in the complexity of the software network,

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[25] "Hacking" or "modding" entails using additional software to modify a game's code or assets from the outside. Exploits are about changing the game from within.
[26] The details of the glitch and exploit are quite technical. See Rick Osgood to Hackaday, 2015, https://hackaday.com/2015/01/22/reprogramming-super-mario-world-from-inside-the-game/.
[27] Like "bugs," exploits might motivate the developers to create software "patches" (updates to the code) to block exploits and improve balance in competition. However, on occasions, designers can marvel at the ingenuity of exploits and leave them in or even build additional content to accommodate such exploits, (essentially rendering the glitch and exploit into a retroactive feature).

exploits which can never be predicted, as the computer scientists would say, 'statically.'" It is the intricacy of the system itself that leaves it vulnerable because, the more details its presents, the more opportunities for malfunctions. Galloway also makes a constructive point about how exploits only occur in a "software program," a system that has been intentionally designed to operate according to parameters, and not in a "natural language," a system that develops without any conscious management and without prescriptive rules.[28] This distinction is crucial because it separates *the* world, which operates as system designed through a natural language, and *a* world, a sub-system that has been created and operates within limited, authored parameters. For Galloway, "exploits operate *intensively* within and through the rules of the symbolic system, while natural language operates extensively as a result of a combinatorial discursive logic never intent on probing the boundaries of allowable style."[29] That is to say, exploits and glitches exist only in relation to an artificially constructed system with definitive borders. To use words like *glitch* or *exploit* in relation to the natural world is to imply that mistakes can be made in nature. What appears to be a glitch in nature—for example, a genetic mutation—is not so much a malfunction, but an indication of a preceding lack of full comprehension of its operations; it indicates a flaw in our prior expectations. Likewise, so-called exploits in nature are more aptly be deemed "inventions" or "discoveries," because the exploit only operates in relation to intended borders that have been designed to operate according to some plan.[30]

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[28] This idea is also helpful to think about in relation to how we *play* different kinds of games. A sand-box game like *Minecraft* operates more like a "natural language" in that it provides tools to invent new features. Consequently, building something never imagined by the game's designers is not an exploit in the way it would be in a more tightly prescribed experience of *Super Mario World*.

[29] Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, 64-65.

[30] We could say that exploits do not exist in nature because if a natural law can be broken, then the law never existed to begin with. This relies on the premise that "nature" itself has a will and intentionality. Clearly, this skirts a theological discussion here about God as the "designer" of the natural world, one that certainly seems relevant considering *The Truman Show's* clear religious metaphors. This comparison certainly provides a challenge to the distinction between the

Reconsidering *The Truman Show* through this framework allows us to see that Truman's process of coming into consciousness is about discovering that his "natural language" is essentially a designed "program." Those expressions thought to be chance or given are authored. Thus, Truman no longer experiences Seahaven as *the* world, because it is now *a* world. Put another way, Seahaven—the world he took as a given—is a construction, a diegesis filled with narration and expression. This allows Truman to be cognizant of the intentionality programmed into every facet of the world surrounding him. Each gesture, object, and happening are deliberate constructions functioning to some larger end. In a sense, Truman's mode of perception is entirely paranoid in its suspicion of some grand design and conspiracy within Seahaven. However, within the diegesis, the machinations are real, so Truman's paranoia is proved justified; (perhaps this film is a counter-productive model to those suffering with mental illness and "The Truman Show Delusion").[31] Effectively this investigative mode of perception is paranoid and schizophrenic if applied to a natural language, but justified and appropriately critical if applied to a designed program. In fact, as Truman begins seeing his world through this seemingly paranoid lens, he is increasingly aligning his perception with that of the film spectator, who always sees Seahaven through a layer of designed mediation.

Yet another complicating factor of *The Truman Show* is that Truman is often additionally surrounded by authored expressions, which is not aimed at his perception, but instead aimed at the diegetic television audience of "The Truman Show." For instance, the television broadcast "The Truman Show" also includes excessive product placements aimed at the diegetic TV audience, to which Truman seems mostly unaware. Much of the joke is that these product placements are

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natural and programmed/designed under the assumptions that a) God designed the natural world and b) God's design can have unintended malfunctions. However, I am not operating under these assumptions.
[31] See note 19.

anything but subtle, as they harken back to 1950s television's live-reads, in which sitcom characters directly addressed an audience and endorsed a sponsored product. *The Truman Show's* layers ensure the film spectator sees these advertisements as heavy-handed (in part, because they are for fictional products), while the diegetic television audience is apparently susceptible to such advertisements about whichTruman is oblivious.

At the same time, Truman's gradual enlightenment allows him to eventually sense that, even as his world exists in relation to his presence, the target of its address is often outside of his purview. We see this during a particularly tense moment for Truman, when his wife abruptly begins a live-read ad, and Truman gets frustrated before asking her, "What the hell are you talking about? Who are you talking to?" For Truman, the realism of his world has malfunctioned, because a sloppy implementation of ad convention has allowed this narration to the television audience to be visible to those within the diegesis. As we may recall, Jameson's notion of realism and Fried's of absorption are premised on a fictional world that seems to exist on its own, one designed to seem wholly unaware of an extra-diegetic voyeur. For "The Truman Show" television audience, realism entails disguising Seahaven's design so that Truman would believe it to contingent and un-authored. Truman's enlightenment allows him to begin perceiving the narration embedded into the diegesis is aimed both at him and those television spectators who rely on Truman as a guarantor for plausibility.

Crucially, we find an almost identical use of layered narration in the way video games designers will provide veiled narration to the player within the diegesis when they do not want to resort to non-diegetic narration for instruction. Video games often require players to essentially study the diegetic world to discern patterns and routines from the vantage point of an external narrator. Playing the same level twice, for instance, allows our second playthrough to include

omniscient knowledge about what to expect, a dramatic irony that was not present on the first playthrough. For example, the player must take note of the consistent routes guards take when patrolling a warehouse in *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami, 1998), or the way a giant beast telegraphs each attack consistently in *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico, 2005). These are details that are effectively imperceptible to the diegetic avatar whose knowledge of its future does not match the player's. The point is even that, though many instructive features are plausibly set in the diegetic world, they exist to be seen only by the player in role of an external narrator overlooking the game world.

The result of this dynamic address is that players know to approach game worlds under the supposition that the diegesis is implicitly communicating hints about how it operates. At the same time, the player takes an active role in scrutinizing the diegesis as if it is meaningful to suss out hidden narration. We see Truman taking a similar approach to Seahaven as begins consciously observing and investigating the environment for clues to the logic behind the hidden construction. Like the video game player, Truman's instinct is to test the limits of the design and figure out how far the design extends in its preparedness for his actions. When Truman begins haphazardly running into traffic, driving through a wall of pyrotechnic fire, and charging through a crowd of people, he has stopped treating the world as if the consequences were real. Instead he has begun to perceive his world within Caillois' non-serious, play-space or Bordwell's non-practical aesthetic space. That is to say, he begins treating Seahaven like a video game world.

Like the video game player trying to advance through a puzzling narrative or challenging level, Truman begins closely observing and experimenting with his world to understand its hidden mechanisms and parameters, and potentially searching for exploits. At one point, Truman asks his wife to acknowledge the patterns that no longer appear to him as naturally occurring. After Truman correctly predicts the behavior of a few passersby, he turns to his wife: "Don't you want to know

how I did that? I'll tell you. They're on a loop. They go around the block. They come back. They go around again. They just go round and round. Round and round." Truman has taken notice of something beyond the glitch or invisible wall. Unlike the glitch, this bit of narration is exposed only in Truman's interpretation and through his new-found mode of perception. We can assume this loop—and presumably others being employed within Seahaven—are nothing new, but only now has Truman attuned his perception to recognizing them and assigning significance. When stuck in traffic a moment later, Truman turns to his wife and says, "Blocked at every turn. Beautifully synchronized, don't you agree?" Truman is not marveling at a coincidence, but recognizing the ingenuity of the calculated design.

In many ways Truman's playful orientation toward his world is similar to something found in films about characters forced to live moments or days over repeatedly, including *Groundhog Day* (1993, Harold Ramis), *Source Code* (Duncan Jones, 2011) and *The Edge of Tomorrow* (Doug Liman, 2014). Part of what makes Truman's experience distinct from these other films is that Truman's recognition is not only about the lack of practical consequences, but that his world has been authored. While the characters in these other films may have missions, they do not attribute the details of their respective worlds to the intentionality of an author. Truman's approach, however, is one that acknowledges an author function of Seahaven, which is why his response is to find a space to exert his own agency. During his final escape, Truman proves particularly canny in his ability to exploit a glitch in the way he is being surveilled by those in the television production crew. In this sense, he is formulating the author's perspective in order to imagine how he, in turn, has been conceived in terms of reception.

In this sense, the film provides a metaphor about authorial agency as Christof's attempts to tighten control over the narrative is a large part of what goads Truman into denying the validity of

the author's intentions. Had Christof left enough gaps, indeterminacy, and contingency within his design of Seahaven, Truman may never have recognized the constructed parameters of his world and begun to treat his world as a play-space. Christof's refusal to allow Truman to operate as a co-author of sorts, eventually backfires. In Christof's attempts to maintain complete agency, he relies on increasingly implausible diegetic actions—causing the sun to rise in the middle of the night and providing a sudden rainstorm. Eventually, any illusion of Seahaven's objective coherency is lost, to the point that the Christof eventually speaks to Truman through a direct address in a final *deus ex machina:* taking up the voice of god from the heavens.

This moment of the designer's exhausted resources recalls a particular discovery made by video game players trying to explore the entirety of the world of *Grand Theft Auto III* (Rockstar, 2002). After using something like a glitch to scale past a wall that was designed to be impenetrable, the player will find themselves in a courtyard with a sign reading "You werent [sic] supposed to be able to get here you know" (Figure 3.2-F)
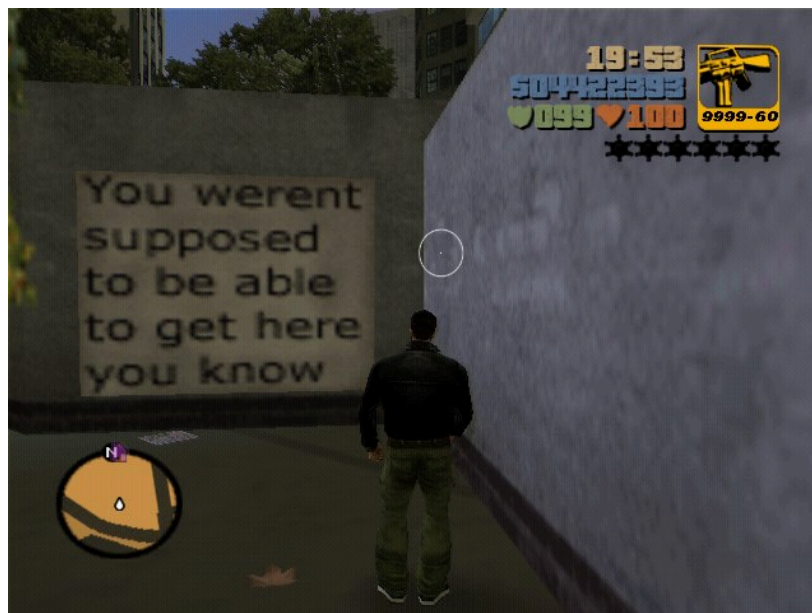

Figure 3.2-F. A diegetic location in *GTA:III* ostensibly designed to be off-limits to players.

This message is not one left by another character. Instead this message has been left by the game's designers for the player who has managed to find it. The game's designers have, like Christof speaking to Truman, abandoned all pretense of concealing their narration with a reflexive direct address. The message itself is complex in that it both acknowledges the designer's inevitable failure to maintain absolute agency over reception, yet it is also asserts the designer's dominion, as if to say, "we even thought of this," with a performative reflexivity reminiscent of *The Stanley Parable*. Still, what we find here is something like Truman's relationship with Christof, where Truman's increasing efforts to exert narrative agency essentially forces the narration to transform from realism to reflexivity.

Notably, the idea of this reflexive reception comes up when Gombrich uses the phrase "the magic circle," the same phrase that is now identified primarily with Caillois' notion of play-spaces. Like Caillois, Gombrich's "magic circle" describes the liminal space of reception, however his inflection in always associated with a more conscious, participatory role on the part of the beholder. In his account of the development of modernism in painting, Gombrich describes how 19th century painters strayed from a certain iconicity and representation to the point at which a "new function of art emerged." With the increasing ambiguity and openness within the frame, "the artist gives the beholder 'more to do', [the artist] draws [the beholder] into the *magic circle* of creation and *allows him to experience something of the thrill of 'making'* which had once been the privilege of the artist."[32] In this context, the magic circle is not merely about the experiencing another world; here it seems to further imply a need for self-awareness, a sensation of agency stemming from the awareness of process of reception. The beholder must be cognizant of the process of creation.

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[32] Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, 160, my emphasis. Gombrich cites Huizinga elsewhere in *Art and Illusion*, however it is unclear whether Gombrich's invocation of the term "magic circle" is supposed to reference Huizinga. Gombrich's use is helpful into own right because it refers to the moment of the spectator's awareness of their role.

In video games, this outside presence is routinely solicited and engaged in a way that we only associate with reflexivity in film narration. When playing narrative video games, we approach these worlds as play-spaces, at once apprehending the world reflexively and as immediately real. The suggestion I want to consider though is that the way one plays with a video game world and the way one experiences a film world are as much a product of the conscious mode of engagement as anything related to the media itself. What if "meta-realism," "reflexivity" and "interaction," are just names for how all sorts of narrative forms can be *played*?

The Truman Show is exceptional because it provides two parallel modes of address—one leaning toward realism, the other pushing toward reflexivity. In so doing, the film demonstrates how meta-realism should not be understood, as Manovich insinuates, as a condition of new media or video games, but instead as a playful mode of engaging any fictional world. We could even say that, to a large extent, film scholars already approach works of realism akin to designed play-spaces. The film scholar already apprehends all fictional worlds through a lens of meta-realism and, consequently, our engagement with film already resembles that of the video game player who consciously tests boundaries and pushes the limits of possibility from inside and outside the fictional world. In our scholarly approaches to the narration in popular Hollywood cinema, our analytical readings sustain a recognition of how these film worlds feel as though they are *real*, while still also recognizing how these films worlds are manufactured using conventions, programmed to elicit certain experiences. We examine how films are constructed, but also conceive of how spectators navigate these spaces.

In a number of ways, then, Truman and the experimenting video game player find an important counterpart in the scholarly film critic analyzing a work of realism. Video game players work to discover the rules of a game world by testing the boundaries of the game's textual branches

and probing its iterative possibilities. As critical scholarship wrested agency away from the authority of a singular precise meaning, the point was to stop treating the author's intended world as definitive, the text as a given, and instead to embrace the license to interpret freely what the text means and how it functions. Like video game players, critics can use the gaps and indeterminacies to contribute their own unique play style, which does not necessarily change the underlying game. Critics already approach texts and aesthetic objects as games. When scholars perform a close-reading of films, we use a combination of the game's internal rules and our own critical context to decide our style of play. The evidence to support our theories of what a text means is harvested from the text, but neither the text (nor the author's intentions) totally structure our interpretations.

By recognizing film worlds as designed play-spaces, we can more consciously approach films like video games. From this approach, filmmakers produce a narrative world are akin to game developers, but use the tools of cinema to create an arena to be inhabited by the spectator. Spectatorial reception is, in turn, an act of *gameplay*, one which is both full of infinite interpretations and experiences that are delimited by the parameters set forth in films as designed. First and foremost, this perspective allows us to note that focusing merely on the film's address or the spectator's reception fails to think about film as a dynamic, reciprocal experience based on the way the spectator navigates the text. We might even call these creative readings "exploits," as they create new ideas and experiences out of others' authored expressions.

CHAPTER 4
Video Games and the Historical World[1]

4.1   EXPEREINCES OF THE MOVING IMAGE

Beginning in the introduction of this dissertation, I have made considered the case for situating

certain video games within a lineage of certain media encoded with *authored expressions*. Like books

containing stories, canvases containing paintings, gramophone records containing musical

performances, and celluloid film containing movies, video game programs can contain deliberate—

but ultimately functionless—articulations subsequently experienced by beholders. Across all of these

media, we can consider these to be aesthetic objects because they contain aesthetic expressions

which can be subsequently experienced as such. Yet there is an important complication that arises

when considering video games' relation to film in particular— the photographic image's ability to

contain *expressions* taken from the historical world.

Famously Benjamin explored the consequences of the photographic images' ability to excise

human subjectivity from the process of representing the world: "for the first time, photography

freed the hand from the most important artistic tasks in the process of pictorial reproduction."[2] In

theory, this has always been film's unique power, to document the world and reveal something about

it hidden in plain sight. This is a quality which is not filtered through an author's expression, but

conveyed through to the automatic process of recording and conveyance. While digital film and

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[1] A version of this chapter was previously published in the open-access journal *Wide Screen*. See Jedd Hakimi, "Playing Los Angeles Itself: Versions of and from the Historical City in La Noire and the"Semi-Documentary" Noir," *Wide Screen* 6, no. 1 (2016).

[2] See the second version of "The Work of Art in The Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" in Walter Benjamin, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, *Selected Writings: 1935-1938*, vol. 3 (Harvard University Press, 1996), 102.

photo-realistic computer graphics stitched into the image certainly complicate our faith in the photographic image's impassive documentation of the world, video games have never been thought of in terms of documentation to begin with. Like animation, video games ostensibly arise from painting or even literature, in that the world must be subjectively recreated rather than documented through recording. One of the principal challenges to creating critical parity between video games and film would be, then, their different ontological relationships to the world. In this chapter, however, we will consider this idea in further detail and question whether this distinction has been exceptionally overestimated.

4.1.1 "The Most Accurate Version of Los Angeles"

One of the chief pleasures of playing Team Bondi's *L.A. Noire* (2011)—a police-procedural, open-world[3] video game in which the player controls a young detective solving criminal cases in post-war Los Angeles—is driving period cars around an ostensibly faithful depiction of 1947 Los Angeles complete with impeccably-modeled topography, street layouts, storefronts, and landmarks. It is a virtual landscape that is at least precise enough to evoke considerable reverie in the account written by journalist Christian Donlan who decided to play the game with his father, himself a native of 1940's L.A. and the son of an Angelino beat-cop. Donlan reported that his father was transfixed:

> *…the whole experience was actually far more affecting and far more powerful [than we expected]. Dad just trailed off, really, lost in the texture of L.A. Noire… surfacing now and then to announce a car or a familiar sight. …I remember that restaurant-- Rialto? God, that place used to show all the old burlesque stuff. What's the name on that oil pump?*

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[3] "Open-world" video games provide players with a fairly large environment to explore at will. Often these games make an effort to avoid restricting the player to a single task or single location during gameplay.

…So did my dad find L.A. Noire accurate? Intoxicatingly so…the little details were the most affecting, though: the tyre-changing bay outside a gas station, or the wooden crate of bottles stacked next to a vending machine…[4]

The elder Donlan's reaction is a testament to *L.A. Noire*'s environmental designers who were reportedly meticulous about the accuracy of their reproduction of the Los Angeles 1947 cityscape, drawing on archival material including period maps, photography and film footage.[5] One effusive press account related that "Team Bondi pored over [archival material]…which provided the designers everything from building locations and conditions, public transportation routes, traffic patterns—the real arterial structure of a city preserved mostly in film and literature."[6] Donlan himself even makes the remarkably sincere claim that "as a result [of *LA Noir*], gamers will be immersed in the most accurate version of 1940s Los Angeles ever created."[7] Donlan is evidently overlooking the notion that the "most accurate version…ever created" would more likely be the *original* version of Los Angeles—the version people were "immersed" in because it was where they actually resided in 1947.

Still, poking holes in Donlan's statement (which, to be fair, may be referring only to video games) is far less productive than exploring some of the ambiguous terminology and ideas we rely on when referring to how cities are represented through the moving image. After all, what does it even mean to *create an accurate version* of Los Angeles? Within common parlance, designating something as a "version" implies that it is one of multiple existing iterations. Maybe, then, 1947 Los Angeles only becomes a *version* of itself—the *original or historic version* of Los Angeles—only once it is

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[4] Christian Donlan, "Night and the City," http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2012-10-09-night-and-the-city.
[5] Much of this information was culled from a number of Los Angeles archives including those of the University of Southern California and the University of California Los Angeles. See Nathan Marsters, "How Archivists Helped Video Game Designers Recreate the City's Dark Side for 'L.A. Noire'," kcet.org/updaily/socal_focus/history/how-archivists-helped-video-game-designers-recreate-the-citys-dark-side-in-la-noire-33822.html
[6] Joseph A. Bernstein and Dan Nosowitz, "How L.A. Noire Rebuilt 1940s Los Angeles Using Vintage Extreme Aerial Photography," popsci.com/technology/article/2011-05/using-extreme-aerial-photography-1920s-rockstar-rebuilt-1940s-los-angeles-la-noire.
[7] Donlan, "Night and the City".

simulated, re-produced, and/or re-presented. We also probably want to avoid implying that the

historic Los Angeles, a city developed by countless entities over time, was "created" in the same way

as a representation of the city might be created by an intentional organizing force (e.g. a video game

manufacturer). Concerning representation, we might also be concerned with assessing the level of

"accuracy" of a given version. Even if *LA Noire* had managed to provide players with a photo-

realistic, spatially-precise, video game versions of Los Angeles—something which the game heralds

the possibility of, even if it may not have accomplished[8]—it seems impossible to measure the

"accuracy" of a given version of Los Angeles.

Consequently, we are left with a series of interrelated questions. How do we compare a

authored version of a city to the version that we presume to have historically existed? Do we compare

it to other "versions" we have seen in representations or the traces left in archives and period

footage? How might, then, a graphically rendered version compare to those countless photographic

versions of Los Angeles which have served as settings in countless films and television shows? What

is at stake in *LA Noire's* attempt to (re)create a version of a location which has (or had) a real-world

referent especially in relation to those seemingly parallel versions appearing in live-action television

shows and movies? Should we assume that a film shot on location in Los Angeles in the period the

game depicts, something like *He Walked by Night* (Anthony Mann, 1948), provides a more accurate

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[8] Besides the current technical and economic constraints that make such a feat impossible, there are those who dispute the historical precision of *LA Noire* for other reasons. In an extended blog post by the website *1947 Project*, a website dedicated to history of 1947 Los Angeles, Nathan Marsak writes that *LA Noire's* "omission of oft-photographed …buildings is a bit perplexing." He goes one to remark that "[*LA*] *Noire* shall then be the introduction for many to the wonderful world of 1947 Los Angeles, and as they learn it in its eidetic state, they are going to come away with a view of the City at a place in time that is almost, but not quite. If they learn it here first, then, when they subsequently see it presented accurately, they'll figure the simulacrum to be the true version." Nathan Marsak to Nathan's Blog, April 20, 2011, http://www.1947project.com/47PplaysLANoire. .
Further still, *LA Noire's* own developers (or, more likely, their attorneys) downplay any expectations of the game's "accuracy" in the legal disclaimer that briefly appears each time the game is loaded: "This videogame is a fictional story set in 1940's Los Angeles. It depicts invented fictionalized historical characters, groups, location, scenes and events in a manner that is not historically accurate."

version of Los Angeles precisely because it relies on the city of Los Angeles to supply its own visual

referent within the diegesis?

My motivation for raising these questions is less about trying to determine a hierarchy

amongst specific texts and forms of representations in terms of accuracy, than it is about

interrogating broader issues related to the representation, historicity, and visual memory of real-

world locations that become diegetic worlds through moving image media.

It is also crucial to acknowledge that because *LA Noire* specifically depicts Los Angeles, a

location so frequently visualized already as the center of film production and thus the de facto

setting for so many movies, it places the game into a fairly robust conversation about distinct

versions of the city. Thom Andersen's brilliant video essay *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003) makes it

eminently clear why Los Angeles in particular has spawned a plethora of prominent critical inquiries

into the lived city's relationship with its fictional counterparts. Among these is Mike Davis' instantly

canonical book, *City of Quartz,* in which he points out that Los Angeles is an exceptional city

precisely because it has been "infinitely envisioned," which is also what makes uncovering an *accurate*

version of the city all that much more elusive.[9] In what amounts to Davis' faint dismissal of

Baudrillard's "hyperreal" Los Angeles,[10] Davis sardonically insists that "beyond its myriad rhetorics

and mirages, it can be presumed that the city [of Los Angeles] actually exists."[11] And so, Davis'

strategy for recovering some existent Los Angeles requires a thorough reckoning with those

mythologizing "mirages," each of which he understands as distinctive "attempts to establish

authentic epistemologies for Los Angeles."[12] Like the noteworthy projects of Kenneth Anger, Joan

Didion, Reyner Banham, Michael Sorkin, David Fine and Norm Klein, Davis' recognizes that

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[9] Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, New ed. (London ; New York: Verso, 2006), 23.
[10] See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 12-13.
[11] Davis, *Quartz,* 23.
[12] Ibid.

understanding the idea of Los Angeles inevitably involves a complex dialectic with its many collective versions.[13]

Within the scope of this chapter, however, Los Angeles is representative of a broader set of questions regarding the relationship between a "real-world" city—*the original, historic version* that, in Davis's terms, we presume "actually exists"—and its assorted visual simulacra. While there has been substantial critical attention paid to this phenomenon in film,[14] there has been far less consideration toward understanding the parallel phenomenon in video games.[15] Accordingly, Donlan's slippage, which apparently supplants the lived experience of 1940's Los Angeles with that of played experience of *LA Noire*'s digital version, provides as good a moment as any to reflect on what it means to "accurately" (re)create, (re)present, or document a version of a real-world city in a video game. The relevance for exploring this relationship is in part a response to the increasing prevalence of video games that use cities from our world as open-world settings—something we see in the Rockstar North's *Grand Theft Auto* series' parodic caricatures of New York, Miami, and Los Angeles; Bethesda's *Fallout* series' post-apocalyptic Washington DC, Las Vegas, and Boston; and Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* series' depiction of a growing number of historical cities including Renaissance

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[13] See Kenneth Anger, *Hollywood Babylon* (Phoenix, Ariz.,: Associated Professional Services, 1965); Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, vol. 1st Touchstone (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979); Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (London,: Allen Lane, 1971). Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (New York;London;: Verso, 1997). David M. Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles : A City in Fiction*, 1st ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000).See also Charles G. Salas and Michael S. Roth, *Looking for Los Angeles: Architecture, Film, Photography, and the Urban Landscape*, vol. 8 (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2001); Ian Scott, "Filming Los Angeles: History, Hollywood, and the City's Disastrous Imagination," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2009).

[14] See various collections of essays including Tony Fitzmaurice and Mark Shiel, *Screening the City* (London: Verso, 2003); Barbara Caroline Mennel, *Cities and Cinema*, Routledge Critical Introductions to Urbanism and the City (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008); Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice, *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context* (Malden, Mass;Oxford, U.K;: Blackwell Publishers, 2001); Andrew Webber and Emma Wilson, *Cities in Transition: The Moving Image and the Modern Metropolis* (New York;London;: Wallflower Press, 2008). On Los Angeles in particular, see previous note.

[15] Perhaps the only substantial and sustained attention comes from Robert Schweizer's dissertation on video game cities. See Robert Thomas Schweizer, "Videogame Cities in Motion" (Dissertation, Georgia Institute of Technology, 2014).

Florence, Venice, Rome, revolutionary-era Paris and colonial cities of the Americas.[16] As video games increasingly render their own versions of historic cities, aiming for some type of "accuracy" architecturally, geographically, topographically, historically, or otherwise—it is imperative to reflect on how we experience these games and the worlds they create.

   LA Noire may be a somewhat atypical example amongst these open-world city games in that it particularly aims to elicit the experience of a historic or "authentic" version of Los Angeles as opposed to the parodic, foreshortened, or fantastic renderings featured in the majority of video games, as mentioned above. At the same time, because it puts the "infinitely envisaged" Los Angeles front and center and relies heavily on cinematic modes of production, cinematic style, and film genre, [17]*LA Noire* is also particularly instructive for situating this inquiry within an existing critical framework from film studies. While a more comprehensive critical account of *LA Noire* might engage with the noteworthy scholarship on Los Angeles as a city with an exceptional municipal and institutional history—especially as it relates to film noir[18]—or delve into the broader scholarly conversation about open-world video games,[19] my more narrow aim here is instead to situate *LA Noire* in relation to a particular cinematic tradition of using real-world cities—as places, ideas, and phenomenological experiences—within moving images.

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[16] Rockstar North's *Grand Theft Auto* games referenced here include *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002), *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2005), *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2009), and *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013). Ubisoft various subsidiaries developed *Assassin's Creed* games referenced here include *AC II* (2009), *AC Brotherhood* (2010), *AC III* (2012) *AC IV: Black Flag* (2013), *AC Unity* (2014). Bethesda's games referenced here are *Fallout 3* (2008), *Fallout New Vegas* (2010) and *Fallout 4* (2015).

[17] In both its production and in its content *LA Noire* showcases its affiliation to cinema and cinematic history. Beyond the game's overt references to specific films and an arching narrative that evokes film noir, the performances of all the actors in the narrative portions of the game were actually filmed on cameras using live actors and motion capture technology before they were adapted into the game's world.

[18] See Nicholas Christopher, *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City* (New York: Free Press, 1997); William Hare, *L.A. Noir: Nine Dark Visions of the City of Angels* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2004); Alain Silver and James Ursini, *L.A. Noir: The City as Character* (Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica Press, 2005); Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles : A City in Fiction.*

[19]See for instance Steffen P Walz, *Toward a Ludic Architecture: The Space of Play and Games* (ETC press, 2010); Gordon Calleja, *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (MIT Press, 2011).

On this note we will see that while *LA Noire* is unabashedly indebted to the film noir and neo-noir canon, the game's tension between fictional narrative and historic versions of the city actually pinpoints a more peculiar cinematic lineage—specifically, that of a small cluster of noir-adjacent films from the post-WWII period known as "semi-documentary" noir films, which are fictional narrative films that incorporate documentary features in atypical ways as we shall later see.[20] This connection particularly helps explain *LA Noire*'s seemingly idiosyncratic decision to choose Jules Dassin's 1947 film *The Naked City* as the only film it fully adapts into a playable criminal case; "idiosyncratic" because *The Naked City*, as an example of semi-documentary noir, plainly lacks many of the more recognizable noire tropes—the "hard-boiled" detective character, the femme fatale, the low-key lighting scheme—that appear in other noir films referenced in the game. Moreover, the qualities of the semi-documentary noir allow us to recognize a critical framework for understanding *LA Noire's* ability to signal the possibility of a video game variant of a documentary function. That is, following Bill Nichols, if we understand the documentary function to be comprised of images that serve as evidence in arguments about the historical world, this project hopes to use *LA Noire* to begin defining a video game documentary function that is both reminiscent of and distinct from that the documentary function contained within the photographic form.

4.1.2 LA or Noir?

In its very premise as a noir-esque, story-driven video game set in a historically scrupulous depiction of Los Angeles, *LA Noire* maintains certain tensions between contradictory narrative and

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[20] I say "noir-adjacent" because there is some debate about whether they should even be considered film noir. William Park refers to these films as "docu-noirs" but says "only some spirit of inclusiveness would admit them into the noir fold." See William Park, *What Is Film Noir?* (Lanham, Md;Lewisburg [Pa.];: Bucknell University Press, 2011), 60. More discussion on the "semi-documentary" is found later in this chapter.

documentary-like ambitions. In its narrative aims, the game wants players to feel as if they are taking

part in something like an elaborate, self-referential film noir, and thus inhabiting a stylized, resolutely

fictional version of Los Angeles. At the same time, the game often retains a documentary-like

ambition to make players feel as though they are navigating eight square miles of a historic version

of 1947 Los Angeles.[21] In terms of the former, the game's designers are quite explicit in their

indebtedness to a certain mythical Los Angeles cultivated by Hollywood through those noir films of

the mid-century, evidenced in explicit namechecks and knowing citations of famous Los Angeles

based film noir like *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Murder My Sweet* (1944), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), and *Lady

in the Lake* (1947).[22] Each of these films are, for instance, included among the games "Gold Film

Reels" challenge, which, in an obvious break from historical pretense and realism, provide players

with an optional scavenger hunt for hidden film canisters strewn about the city. The homage to the

version of Los Angeles of film noir also carries over into the game's affected dialogue and lingo,

which recalls those noir books and films of the era. At other times, though, what could be self-

reflexive noir stylization within a post-modern pastiche, might also function as techniques for adding

realistic detail to the experience of navigating a historic version of Los Angeles. Conceivably, the

characters' seemingly stylized mannerisms could just as easily be depictions of 1940's Angelinos who

could have modeled and fashion themselves after the film conventions of the period. And, when the

movie theater marquees around the city display films like *Odd Man Out* (1947) and *The Lady from

Shanghai* (1947), films that certainly could have been on theater marquees at the point when the game

takes place, these references are as much instances of a "reality effect"—adding non-essential but

plausible details to diegetic landscape in a manner that provides an air of authenticity—as they are

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[21] The basic tenets of this tension are already apparent in the way the game presents the option for the player to play the game in either the more noir-like black-and-white or in the true-to-life mode of color.

[22] Notably, many of the titles specifically referenced in the game were released after 1947. In this way, they feel more like nondiegetic references.

winking references to those noir films. The point is that, by recognizing how the *LA Noire* relies on

a text like *The Lady from Shanghai* to serve as both a reflexive citation and realistic historical detail, we

can begin to understand the implicit tension between the game's narrative and historic modes of

experience.

Essentially *LA Noire*'s conflicted ambitions reflect two distinct types of gameplay

corresponding respectively to the fictional or historic versions of Los Angeles. To begin with, the

fictional, "noir-esque" Los Angeles is expressed during the fairly lengthy, convention-heavy,

narrative, which is strewn over the course of a couple dozen sequential police department "cases."

That is, contrary to the free-form nature of the elder Donlan's encounter with the game, the central

narrative of *LA Noire* puts players in control of Cole Phelps (voiced by and visually modeled after

Aaron Stanton),[23] a young American war veteran slowly working his way up through the ranks of the

Los Angeles police department as a detective. Phelps is the player's primary avatar, progressing

through the game's narrative by solving the increasingly available cases (many of which are loosely

based on real-life crimes committed in 1940's Los Angeles). This is accomplished by driving around

between relevant locations, exploring crime scenes, collecting clues, inspecting significant objects,

and interrogating persons of interest.[24] While the narrative structure within individual cases provides

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[23] Aaron Stanton is one of several actors in the game selected from television's *Mad Men* period drama (AMC, 2007-2015). It is a production decision that perhaps aims to tap into a contemporary sense of the American mid-century by borrowing associations from other texts.

[24] While somewhat outside the scope of this dissertation, the interrogation sequences are actually paradigmatic expressions of the fundamental tension between *LA Noire's* desire to provide an experience that is both authentic and "fictional" simultaneously. Without going into too much detail, the gameplay relies on closely reading the body language and facial expressions of these digital characters to determine a statement's veracity. Consequently, the developers put a tremendous emphasis on utilizing innovative technology to closely capture and reproduce the details of actors' performances in terms of facial expressions and body movements. The justification being that human performance will capture something more authentic then a completely fabricated image. In essence, the player is tasked with scrutinizing the actor's performance, which has been translated into a digital animation, in order to determine the veracity of the character's statements. The irony is, of course, that, in performing as a character, the actor is essentially always "lying" no matter how accurately they have been rendered. For an account of the technology. See Leigh Alexander, "L.A. Noire Debuts New Animation Capture Solution from Depth Analysis,"

some room for variation depending on a player's actions and decisions, the larger trajectory of the narrative is entirely fixed.[25] For instance, if a player misses enough clues or makes enough wrong decisions, the principal consequence is that the case must be re-played from the beginning in order to receive more cases and, thus, progress the narrative.

It is crucial to recognize that the version of the city players encounters during this narrative mode of gameplay is the one brought to them through the scripted, pre-coded arrangement. Every characterization, every significant location, every line of dialogue, was thoughtfully composed to convey a particular segment of the city, one that the designers have principally constructed to feel reminiscent of film noir. Accordingly, within *LA Noire,* the narrative mode of gameplay often explicitly relies on cinematic narration, chiefly through a tremendous amount of "cut-scenes" (expository cinematic sequences during which players has no control), to relay its central story. These are sequences that particularly use conventional (although probably more "contemporary" than "classical") cinematic techniques of narration including continuity editing—complete with establishing shots, general adherence to the 180-degree rule, and shot-reverse shots—along with a variation of camera angles, shot distances, and camera movements. Moreover, while such a mode of narration would be largely "invisible" in movies or television, within *LA Noire* these cut-scenes are often acutely foregrounded as movielike through excessive narrational devices like a gratuitous "letterbox" style matte which masks the top and bottom of the frame—implying an aspect ratio that is cinematic simply because it is relatively wider than gameplay sequences in which players maintain

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gamasutra.com/view/news/27492/LA_Noire_Debuts_New_Animation_Capture_Solution_From_Depth_Analysis.php .

[25] This narrative structure, in which periods of player agency are contained in between moments of narrative progression, is akin to what Epsen Aarseth described metaphorically as a "string of pearls": "Within each pearl (or microworld) there is plenty of choice but on the level of the string there is no choice at all." See Aarseth's "Quest Games as Post-Narrative Discourse" in Ryan, *Narrative across Media : The Languages of Storytelling*, 361-77.

control over Phelps—constantly shifting camera angles, and disproportionately fast editing. These stylistic excessive or *marked* cut-scenes primarily occur at moments of lengthy exposition, like the beginning or end of cases. In these moments, players are decidedly relegated to role of spectators. In fact, it is also during these sequences that we might say that we encounter an unambiguously fictional, stylized version of Los Angeles.

Notably, however, the game also utilizes cinematic narration in a more subtle manner during gameplay through *unmarked* cut-scenes designed to remain mostly inconspicuous to players. As such, the unmarked cut-scenes refrain from stylistic flourishes like letterbox mattes and excessive camera movement, and instead they utilize cinematic narration more economically, in a manner motivated by immediate narrative goals in game scenarios, for much shorter periods of time. We might say that these unmarked cut-scenes are embedded moments of cinematic narration that are supposed to feel as though they occur as a direct result of players' input, thus concealing the fact that they do not actually maintain continuous agency over the synchronal narration. For example, during an interrogation scene players could direct Phelps to approach a suspect, and, when close enough, they can instruct Phelps to begin a conversation. In the following moment of the game's narration, an unmarked cut-scene will occur, and the game seamlessly cuts to a reverse angle that frames Phelps as he sits down in a chair across from the suspect. Players did not instruct the movement into the chair so much as they provided the primary directive to "interact," at which point the game responded with the unmarked cinematic narration showing Phelps sitting down and opening up his notepad. Further still, during the ensuing conversation, the game's perspective might shift from moments awaiting players' input, to a more cinematic shot-reverse shot based on the direction of the conversation as guided by players. While the dialogue's general flow may result from players' inputs, they lacks any synchronal control over the specifics of the narration—the dialogue, the editing, the

camera placement—during the majority of the exchange. That is to say, despite being a kind of hypertext, the specifics of both the narrative and the narration are all tightly scripted ahead of time.

The mixture of marked and unmarked cut-scenes demonstrates how the narrative mode of gameplay explicitly and implicitly relies on a tremendous amount of cinematic narration. Thus players experience a particular, perhaps familiar characterization of the city, one stylized to feel like the setting of a fictional noir; it is the fictional version of Los Angles that "feels like a movie." Alternatively, when players evade the central storyline and related scripted sequences, players are provided a significantly greater level of narrational agency. In this mode of gameplay, players avoid narrative version of the city, one that is curated to provide a particular story, and encounters a categorically distinct version of the city. To understand the distinction, it might be helpful to take a closer look at the first moment of an initial playthrough of the game, in which *LA Noire* essentially switches between the distinct modes of gameplay/narration, and the game cuts from its opening cinematic montage—a marked cut-scene (Figure 4.1-A)—to a high angle perspective directly behind the police cruiser containing Phelps where players takes over control (Figure 4.1-B). As with the countless subsequent instances in which narrational agency will be transferred to players, the game cuts to a third-person, high angle perspective that centers Phelps in relation to the world immediately in front of him, and the letterboxed mattes quickly recede out of the frame, to provide an aspect ratio that fills the entire screen. In concert, a non-diegetic "heads-up display"[26] showing a small circular street map of the avatar's immediate vicinity in Los Angeles appears in the lower left corner of the frame along with some non-diegetic instructions for players. It is a conventionally familiar way for video games to communicate to players that they now controls both the avatar's

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[26] A "Heads-up Display," or HUD, is essentially an image that overlays (or frames) the primary world image and provides information to the player without forcing their perspective to change. It is common for HUDs to tell the player how much "life" a character has left or how many seconds the player has to complete a level.

spatial location and the perspectival view—or camera—in the world.[27] With this shift, comes a

marked change of players' relationship to the diegetic world.

Figure 4.1-A. Shots from the "marked" cut-scene before players have any agency

Figure 4.1-B. The perspective at the moment when players first have control over Phelps

In contrast to the cinematic narration's variation in shot-distances, editing, and camera

mobility, in this mode, players now maintain significant agency over the game's narration (albeit a

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[27] In Alexander Galloway's terms, the game is switching from a mode of narration that only includes "diegetic machine acts," to a mode that includes both "diegetic machine acts" and "diegetic player acts." See Galloway, *Gaming Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. The "HUD" (see previous note), meanwhile, represents a kind of non-diegetic communication between the machine and the player.

narration that is procedurally limited in relation to the avatar). As evidenced in Donlan's account, players can now eschew the central narrative altogether and instead direct the avatar to explore the extended 1940's Los Angeles terrain. Outside the confines of the story arc, the motivation to investigate the city is not necessarily tied to solving a crime or completing a specific, structured task; instead, players maintain the possibility of experiencing a version of the city that mostly lacks a frame that charges the city and its locations with a particular noir-esque sentiment. This version of Los Angeles is mostly presented without the variations in shot-distances, editing, and camera mobility outside of those controlled by players in relation to Phelps. This version of the city is encountered based on the whims of players who control both the avatar's spatial location and perspectival view of the city. In this mode, players can walk or drive around at their leisure, taking in the sights and exploring locations like a time-travelling flaneur. Players can, for instance, linger in the interstitial spaces and admire views of the city, spaces which fall outside the narrative framework but resonate with a lived experience of the city.

In this open mode of gameplay, Los Angeles is mostly devoid of those narrative aspects that present a stylized, imagined, and mythic version of the city, and we instead encounter a version of Los Angeles more like the one experienced by Donlan—a historic version of the city that can somehow be described with the terms "real," "authentic," and "accurate." While these are all very problematic terms, to better understand the experiences elicited by *LA Noire*'s alternating modes of narration it is helpful to recognize the game's affinity with a specific cinematic lineage, the semi-documentary, which, like *LA Noire* is torn between narrative and historic versions of cities.

4.1.3 "This is the City as it is"

There are a few superficial explanations of *LA Noire*'s decision to adapt *The Naked City* as a stand-alone case in the game.[28] For one thing, the game and the film are each set in 1947, and, consequently they both choose to underscore the same moment in US history when young American veterans came back from WWII to a more cynical home front. Also, one of the film's detectives, James Halloran, greatly resembles *LA Noire's* Phelps in a number of ways: they are both are young, straight-laced veterans, family men, and novice detectives, and they even look alike. However, focusing on these superficial resonances largely misses the point of what makes *The Naked City* an atypical film, and, therefore, what makes *LA Noire*'s adaptation of the film so peculiar and suggestive. The fact is that the main plotline *The Naked City* is somewhat forgettable. What actually makes the film unique and interesting is its essential relationship to New York City where it was set and filmed. This point is explicitly emphasized by the film's producer and narrator, Mark Hellinger, during the opening voice-over narration which runs over aerial shots of the city:

> *Ladies and gentlemen the motion picture you are about to see is called The Naked City. …And I may as well tell you frankly that it's a bit different from most films you've ever seen. …As you see, we're flying over an island. A city. A particular city. And this is a story of a number of people—and a story also of the city itself. It was not photographed in a studio. Quite the contrary… [the] actors... played out their roles on the streets, in the apartment houses, in the skyscrapers of New York itself. And along with them, a great many thousand New Yorkers played out their roles also. This is the city as it is.*

From the outset, the film openly insists that its images should not be apprehended in typical fictional terms, as the version of the city it is depicting, it contends, is not a fictional version. Like the tabloid

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[28] The game's version of the case follows the general details of the crime of the film almost beat-for-beat: after a young in-store dress model is found dead in a bathtub, the detectives find out the victim was secretly working with her coworker's fiancé to burglarize the rich friends of a love-struck doctor, before she was eventually murdered by a hired goon in an effort to cover up the crimes. According to players' testimonials "The Naked City" case is possibly the longest in duration of the dozens of plotlines in the game. See lanoire.wikia.com/wiki/The_Naked_City

photographer Weegee's infamous book of candid street photography, *Naked City*,[29] which provided

both the title and certain inspiration for the film, Hellinger and Dassin's decision to take the film out

of the studio set and shoot the film almost entirely on location is part of a rhetoric of authenticity.

They are selling a notion that they are capturing "the city as it is," rather than the creating another

fictional version like those found in "most films."[30] And, what Edward Dimendberg describes as the

film's "insistence on apprehending an unmediated and architectural reality,"[31] is essentially a mode

of narration that asserts the film's ability to capture a genuine, authentic, real, original version of

New York City. The city which we will see captured visually, the film claims, is the historic version

of the city, the same city that could be found in a non-fiction, documentary film.

Notably, *The Naked City* was not the only noir-age film with a tendency to use certain

documentary rhetoric to elicit a sense of authenticity within a narrative film. According to film

scholar William Lafferty, the film can be included amongst other "semi-documentary" noir films,

such as Henry Hathway's *The House on 92nd Street* (1945) and *Call Northside 777* (1947), Anthony

Mann's *T-Men* (1947) and *He Walked by Night* (1948), and Dassin's own *Night and the City* (1950), each

of which distinctly highlight their relationship to some combination of real events and/or real

locations through documentary film conventions.[32] More importantly here, as in *LA Noire*, the

distinct modes of narration within the semi-documentary noir film similarly express certain tensions

between their narrative and documentary ambitions.

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[29] Weegee, *Naked City* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975).

[30] Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004), 50-53.

[31] Ibid., 41-43.

[32] William Lafferty has pointed out that the term "semi-documentary" is used by film historians and popular critics to refer to a cluster of American films from the mid-to-late 1940's. Lafferty points out that the term was used regularly in newspapers from the time to describe films characterized by "the topicality of the subject matter, reliance upon 'location' shooting, and particularly, the influence of one producer, [Louis] de Rochemont, and one studio, Twentieth Century-Fox." William Lafferty, "A Reappraisal of the Semi-Documentary in Hollywood, 1945-1948," *Velvet Light Trap*, no. 20 (1983): 24. Also see Randal Clark, "This Is Not: Falseness in Documentary Cinema," in *Trompe(-)L'oeil : Imitation & Falsification*, ed. Philippe; Aïssatou Sy-Wonyu Romanski (Mont-Saint-Aignan: Publications de l'Université de Rouen, 2002), 341-58.

Most scholars characterize the significant driving forces behind the semi-documentary noir films to be the prominent producers Louis de Rochemont and Mark Hellinger, who both brought a certain investment in the journalistic notion of capturing the world rather than representing it. Rochemont was an Academy Award-winning documentarian who had previously co-created the widely seen 1930's series of newsreels, *The March of Time*, and Hellinger was an immensely popular newspaper columnist in New York City prior to producing films. It is no wonder, then, that one of the documentary conventions routinely exhibited in these films is the "voice of god" narrator who often directly addresses the audience in an instructive or informational tone so reminiscent of the newsreels of the era. Further, when this spoken narration is present, the semi-documentary noir films essentially operate in a conventional expository documentary mode with a voiceover providing a contextual description of non-narrative sequences that would otherwise fall outside classical continuity editing.

Like *LA Noire,* however*,* these films seem torn between relaying a plotted story using formal conventions of narrative cinema and establishing the veracity of their settings. As in the concurrent Italian neorealist films, the semi-documentary noir films are shot on location, include non-professional actors, and demonstrate an interest in the quotidian happenings of urban residents.[33] However, unlike the Italian neorealist films, these features remain in the relative periphery because the "semi-documentary" noir films inevitably include a central criminal investigation. Looking a bit

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[33] Randal Clark argues that the semi-documentary was Hollywood's "response" to Italian neorealism. Clark, "This Is Not: Falseness in Documentary Cinema," 341-42. However, arguing that the "semi-documentary" was a "response" is misleading considering the fact that these films were essentially developed concurrently to those films commonly classified as Italian neorealism. Lafferty additionally makes the points that neorealism did not invent "location shooting [which dates] from the commercial birth of the medium," and, further, that the American "emphasis upon location [in the semi-documentary films] seems to have arisen out of economic necessity during the mid-to-late 1940s." Lafferty, "A Reappraisal of the Semi-Documentary in Hollywood, 1945-1948," 24, 25-27. (Hyphenate altered slightly.)

more closely at what is often cited as the first semi-documentary noir film, Hathaway's *The House on 92nd Street,* provides a helpful illustration of this phenomena.

In an attempt to fuse an apparently historical account of the FBI's uncovering of a Nazi spy ring operating out of Manhattan with a filmic style of the period, *The House on 92nd Street* includes sequences of non-narrative, silently-filmed documentary footage, which plays underneath the confident voice of an anonymous narrator who explains narrative portions shot in a style more reminiscent of a typical film noir. [34] The "documentary" footage is stylistically distinct, looking more like a form found more often in social issue informational films from the era. [35] One reason for this, according to the American Film Institute's catalogue entry for the film, is that much of the documentary portions were taken directly from the FBI's "photographic files," which seems to have included what amounts to b-roll footage of daily work within the FBI and what is purportedly FBI surveillance footage of the German embassy during WWII. [36] In one telling sequence, which includes the FBI footage, the film cuts from a distinctly professionally framed, exterior, medium shot of a window with a camera peeking through noir-esque, venetian blinds, to a reverse shot (ostensibly point-of-view) of surveillance footage, with a markedly different style and quality, that shows a Nazi flag waving outside a building we are told is the German embassy. The ensuing, nearly two-minute montage of surveillance footage shows people walking to and from the building, each with a similar

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[34] This point is made by R. Barton Palmer who argues that these films "[follow] long-accepted documentary protocols, sequences shot silent are explained by the self-assured and omniscient narrator. R. Barton Palmer, "Crime Fiction and Film Noir," in *A Companion to Film Noir*, ed. Andrew Spicer and Helen Hanson (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 134. However, I disagree with Palmer's claim that even the narrative portions of the film have "a neutral, unglamorized visual style [that] attests to the film's accurate reenactment of the official response to the discovered threat." Ibid.

[35] For more on these types of films, see Arch A Mercey, "Social Uses of the Motion Picture," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 250 (1947).

[36] The AFI entry underscores the FBI's cooperation in its aim to produce a candid view of an otherwise clandestine realm: "Numerous contemporary sources note that J. Edgar Hoover gave approval for the film's production…. According to a studio press release, the Bureau's cooperation included providing the production crew with a special surveillance vehicle from which they could film street scenes on location in New York City without attracting a crowd." American Film Institute, P.K. Hanson, and A. Dunkleberger, "Afi: American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States : Feature Films 1941-1950 Indexes," (University of California Press, 1999), 1100.

amateurish quality—readjusting focus, off-center subjects, jump cuts—as the narrator dramatically

explains to the audience that "these are the actual films taken by the FBI." (Figure 4.1-C)

Figure 4.1-C. Shots cutting between fictional footage and actual FBI surveillance footage

The House on 92nd Street initiates a trend found in the semi-documentary noir films that work to

establish the veracity of their narrative worlds by interspersing sequences that retain the experiential

affective qualities of a non-fictional, documentary tradition. Merging together what is essentially a

reenactment with archival footage is not an unusual practice in documentary film, but it is certainly

much more unusual to have extended documentary sequences edited into narrative films. Yet, this is

something we find again and again with these films; both *Call Northside 777* and *T-Men* employ actual

newsreels to set up their narratives.

At the same time, the documentary portions in these films often seem somewhat extraneous

to their central narratives—providing, say, superfluous details of the FBI's fingerprinting

identification process or minutiae about one-way mirrors. The point seems to be less about

confusing the narrative footage with the documentary footage, and more about bolstering the

credibility of the central narrative by associating it with the primary sources of non-fictional, non-

narrative footage. The implicit argument is that documentary aspects of the films maintain their

non-fictional status despite their associations with narrative portions. Meanwhile, the narrative

portions should gain a sense of veracity from the documentary portions. This rhetoric is further

expressed in the way these semi-documentary noir films frequently provide shots that include deep-

spaces or significant landscapes which showcase environments virtually impossible to replicate in a

studio at the time. In *The Naked City,* for instance, the detectives conduct a quick interview atop a skyscraper mid-construction, surrounded by New York's downtown skyline. In *Call Northside 777*, long shots of Jimmy Stewart frame him from a distance walking through a massive panoptic prison complex. Even if the particular scenery is not immediately identifiable to the general viewer, the films implicitly corroborate the idea that the narratives take place in the "real" world, the world that the spectator exists in.

On one hand, one might argue that the non-fictional rhetoric of the semi-documentary noir films are yet another in a line of techniques used to establish a sense of realism. Following this idea, the semi-documentary noir—as in Bill Nichols account of neorealism—would "retain the fictional quality of a metaphor: it presents a world *like* the historical world and asks that we view it, and experience the viewing of it, *like* the viewing, and experience of history itself."[37] The "like" in this statement is important here because it categorically distinguishes the semi-documentary noir from the documentary form, the latter which removes the "like" as it asks that we view its form as a history itself. If the semi-documentary noir's rhetoric merely asks us to view its world *like* the historic world, then it should be understood like other fictional narrative films shot on location, in which a real world location "plays itself," asking us to suspend our cognitive dissonance about the setting and to experience the world of the film effectively—and affectively—as a metaphor of our world, *like* our world. From this perspective, the use of location shooting and documentary rhetoric only works to reduce the amount we need to suspend our disbelief for this process.

On the other hand, perhaps we can argue that the semi-documentary noir film's rhetoric retains certain documentary aspects and such a suspension of disbelief is not even necessary. That is, perhaps its rhetoric claims not to *represent* a version of our world, but instead to capture and

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[37] Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 170.

document aspects of the historical world we live in. This is an essential part of how the documentary film is experienced differently from the fictional film. If the fictional image has the "quality of a metaphor" in being *like* the world, the documentary image somehow retains the affective quality of the original, being the world. (This is not to say that the documentary image can present reality, only that it retains the "quality" of something real in our affective experience. Whether or not it should—an issue that comes up for Baudrillard and others—is a different question.) That is to say, the documentary image functions as a trace of reality, instead of a mere representation.

Consider the idea that semi-documentary noir films—and perhaps even *LA Noire*—do not merely use the documentary form in the service of realism, but in their split modes of narration they manage to maintain certain documentary functions within their texts. To make such an argument we can look to the way that these texts privilege the documentation of their real-world locations over their narratives. The cities foregrounded in these works are not merely "playing versions of themselves" (as Andersen might phrase it), they are also consciously working to document the city in the same manner as a documentary film might. In these works, capturing and relaying the truthfulness of an experience, often the experience of a particular city, is effectively privileged over any individual story. One version of this comes in the consistent trend amongst the semi-documentary noir films to begin with an opening spoken narration, which foregrounds its ability to reveal a city in an account that is supposed to seem honest and raw, often running over a montage of establishing shots of skylines and aerial, birds-eye-views of the urban grid. In these mythologizing introductions, the semi-documentary noir films exhibit their unabashed willingness to depict the setting as a character unto itself. *He Walked by Night*, for example, begins with a grandiose introduction to Los Angeles:

> *This is Los Angeles. Our Lady, the Queen of the Angels, as the Spaniards named her. The fastest growing city in the nation. It's been called a bunch of suburbs in search of a city. And*

> *it's been called the glamour capital of the world. A Mecca for tourists, a stopover for transients, a target for gangsters, a haven for those fleeing from winter, a home for the hardworking. It is a city holding the hopes and dreams of over two million people…*

In *Call Northside 777*, we get a parallel overture, this time for Chicago:

> *In the year 1871 the great fire nearly destroyed Chicago. But out of the ashes of that catastrophe rose a new Chicago—a city of brick and brawn, concrete and guts with a short history of violence beating in its pulse…*

In fact, all of these opening voiceovers spend most of their time setting up their locations without expending nearly as much time setting up their central narrative.

Following in the tradition of the semi-documentary noir film, *LA Noire* likewise introduces its narrative with a non-diegetic voiceover narration running over a montage of quotidian scenes from around the city.

> *The city on the verge of greatness. A new type of city, based not on the man, but on the automobile. The car, symbol of freedom and vitality. Where every man can own his own home and have room to breathe and not be overlooked by his neighbors.... A city of opportunists. A city of dreams where Hollywood will shape the thoughts and desires of the entire planet. …A city of undercurrents, where not everything is as it seems. A twentieth century city that will become a model for the world. A city that has no boundaries, that will stretch as far as the eye can see.*

It is a montage that specifically foregrounds its location, Los Angeles, as the central object of interest, instead of introducing the game's central characters and forthcoming story in any comprehensive way. In *LA Noire's* opening montage, we see ordinary scenes including a man closing on a deal before driving off a lot with a new car, a uniformed police officer (soon to be identified as our protagonist and primary avatar, Cole Phelps) getting a kiss from his wife on his way out to work, a professor-like figure lecturing at a university, a film crew working on a movie, and a busy street where a massive building is under construction. In fact, the general strategy of *LA Noire's* opening tableau of city scenes directly echoes *The Naked City'*s own opening montage, which similarly begins with an assortment of seemingly quotidian moments plucked from around the city, some of which

will be retrospectively relevant to the forthcoming plot and others which just express the range of experiences occurring simultaneously in the city. In both, the montage recognizes the multitudes of storylines the city contains at any given moment, too many to possibly represent within the confines of a film or game. What we understand on some level is that the plot we are about to experience is just one amongst countless plotlines existing simultaneously in the city. Actually, this notion is made quite explicit in The Naked City: after its montage of quotidian scenes from New York has come to a close and the opening aerial shots of Manhattan fade into a darkened but level shot of the city skyline, Hellinger's voiceover states that the film will "begin [its] story this way" —the point of insertion, the particular narrative, was chosen somewhat arbitrarily from countless other possibilities for expressing the primary subject matter, that of New York City itself. In this way, *LA Noire* and *The Naked City* subjugate the narrative occurrences to the primary city setting—a point reiterated with *The Naked City's* famous final voiceover: "there are eight million stories in the naked city—this has been one of them."

This idea may also help explain another key reason that *The Naked City*'s narrative is so amenable to being adapted into a case in *LA Noire*. The particular plotlines in the semi-documentary noir film are, in a sense, iterative and replaceable, which is one reason that Tom Gunning is more likely to characterize them as "police-procedurals" instead as examples of film noir.[38] The point is that unlike like a more typical example of film noir which might rely on the distinctive methods of a

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[38] Tom Gunning and others are more likely to refer to these films as police-procedurals then film noir. In reference to *He Walked by Night* and *The Naked City*, Gunning explains that that these "police-centered films often adopted a semi-documentary style that characterizes the series known as the police procedural, as opposed to the more expressionist treatment of crimes of passion and femme fatales found in…earlier film noirs" Tom Gunning, "Invisible Cities, Visible Cinema: Illuminating Shadows in Late Film Noir," in Tom Gunning, "Invisible Cities, Visible Cinema: Illuminating Shadows in Late Film Noir," in *Cinematicity in Media History*, ed. Jeffrey; Littau Geiger, Karin (Edinburgh, GB: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 161-62.
Also, the idea of "procedurality," which is an important part of how video games have been understood by Ian Bogost, helps express a kind of rules-based formula that these films follow. See Bogost, *Persuasive Games : The Expressive Power of Videogames*.

singular detective, *The Naked City* depicts the systematic process of the investigation, following a formula we know today as the "police procedural." Consequently, the attention to procedure in *The Naked City* allows the causal chain of events to be converted fairly seamlessly into *LA Noire'*s gameplay. That is to say, the methodical steps of investigation in the film—examining the body, searching for evidence at crime scenes, interviewing and re-interviewing suspects—also comprise the bulk of *LA Noire'*s gameplay within the narrative. Consequently, the more bureaucratic, procedural elements of *The Naked City*, those which distinguish it from more paradigmatic examples of film noir, are also amenable to the vernacular of the iterative cases in *LA Noire*. Likewise, it makes sense that both *The Naked City* and *He Walked by Night* inspired police procedural television shows with a tremendous amount of location-shooting in New York and Los Angeles—*The Naked City* (1958-1963) and *Dragnet* (1951-1959) respectively. The semi-documentary noir style was well-suited to the episodic structure of television in which the individual plotlines are essentially iterative.[39] It is also something we see again in *LA Noire'*s many "cases" which, too, are repetitive formulas in which the variables are expendable, but the project to depict the city "as it really is" remains constant.

The choice to elevate the city over the individual narrative, in a way that the narrative merely adds to the "cross-section of a day in the life," is also what allows Edward Dimendberg to link the montage portions of *The Naked City* directly to the tradition of "city symphony films,"[40] a group of non-narrative films from the 1920's and early 1930's, which illustrate the day-in-the-life of particular cities through thematic montages of scenes from those cities. Making the association is crucial

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[39] Jack Webb, the creator and star of Dragnet apparently hatched the idea for the show while working on the production of He Walked by Night. Much of the film's style provided inspiration for the show. See Michael J. Hayde, *My Name's Friday : The Unauthorized but True Story of Dragnet and the Films of Jack Webb* (Nashville, Tenn.: Cumberland House, 2001), 20.

[40] Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, 59.Some of the films include *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Hans Richter, 1927), *Manhatta* (1921), *Études Sur Paris* (1928), *São Paulo, Sinfonia da Metrópole* (1929), *À Propos de Nice* (Jean Vigo, 1930), and *A Bronx Morning* (1931). Bill Nichols sees the city symphony films as a documentary of the city by way of the "modernist avant-garde of the 1920's." Bill Nichols, "Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde," *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 4 (2001): 580, 91.

because the city symphony films themselves demonstrate how documentary functions can essentially operate outside a traditional documentary format. Bill Nichols describes city symphony films as those that "imaginatively reconstruct the look of the world with images, or shots, taken of this world…[beginning] with images of a recognizable reality in order to transform it."[41] In this way, city symphony films function as hybrid forms that invite viewers to experience their cities from unexpected or inventive perspectives. More importantly, they do so by utilizing images that maintain their historical connection to the world of the viewer—the images never become metaphorical and are never fictionalized. That is, the version of the world presented in the city symphony film functionally remains a version of our historical world—not a version *like* the historical world, as in neorealism—even as it is aesthetically transformed through the radical form. Perhaps, then, the semi-documentary noir film and *LA Noire* are doing something quite similar. That is, by combining documentary and fictional forms, could we say that the semi-documentary noir films and *LA Noire* functionally aim to present a version of the historical world back to us in spite of their fictional elements?

To consider this idea, we need to clarify the distinction between experiencing an image within either a documentary or a fictional context. And, to do so, it is essential to turn to Bill Nichols as an authority on the documentary form. Nichols makes the following point:

> *Documentary evidence is … distinct, less because it is of an entirely different order from similar historical evidence in the fictional film (the authentic firearms, waistcoats, and wall hangings in a period film, for example), but because the evidence no longer serves the needs of the narrative as such. Documentary evidence is not a touch of the historically real used to embellish a world. It is not an element deployed and motivated according to the requirements of narrative coherence. Instead documentary evidence refers us to the world and supports an argument about that world directly. (It is still a representation but not a fictional one.) …[E]vidence of and from the historical world may appear in either fiction or documentary*

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[41] Nichols, "Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde," 596.

film and may have the same existential bond to the world to the world in both. In [fiction] it supports a narrative; in the [documentary] is supports an argument.[42]

We might say that the semi-documentary films and *LA Noire* attempt to challenge the relative mutual exclusivity of the fictional and documentary films in relation to evidence. In their dual modes of narration, the settings support the narrative, but more importantly the settings also make arguments concerning the authentic versions of the cities. The implicit argument made by the semi-documentary noir films and *LA Noire*, whether perceived consciously or not, is that even if the individual narratives are fictional, the settings they take place in are real. If anything, the narratives are replaceable, and they either function extraneously alongside the city setting or as helpful structural devices for relaying a cross-section view of the city. In this way, these texts work to present a version of the world that is not just *like* our world, but, in preserving a documentary function, presents a version that affectively retains the quality of our historic world. These images retain the status as an argument about the historical version of the world despite their relation to the fictional form.

4.2   RENDERING FUNCTIONS

4.2.1 "The Slightly Uncomfortable Space"

Even as we recognize resonances between *LA Noire* and the semi-documentary noir film, it is still important to not ignore some fundamental formal distinctions between these texts. In Nichols' formulation, what counts as "evidence of and from the historical world," relies heavily on what he sees as the photographic image's "existential bond to the world." That is, for Nichols, the documentary function in cinema relies on the camera's implicit ability— filmic image's "indexical

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[42]Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, 116. My italics.

quality," as it is often called—to accurately trace what appears in front of its filming eye so that the testimony about the historical world is fundamentally underwritten by the photographic images' primary link with the world. Although notions of the photographic image's indexical bond have been challenged in film scholarship[43] and/or superseded by the prevalence of digital photography, Photoshop, and CGI (which, arguably, have turned the filmic image into a mediated graphic image),[44] we can acknowledge that the documentary image's truth claims have not gone entirely extinct. In the law, in our personal lives, and in our social relations, the filmed image is still experienced and functions as "evidence of and from" something that occurred in our historical world; this is likely because we have not completely lost faith in the photographic form's ability record historical reality in some fashion. In other words, it is plausible to assume that truth claims of the documentary image hinge, at least in part, on a continued belief in filmic indexicality. Consequently, film's indexical quality, then, seemingly provides an ontological distinction between the filmed image and the graphic image, the latter which is considered a mediated, more suspect secondary account of the historical world. Such an understanding, however, potentially precludes a game like *LA Noire* from seemingly ever maintaining a documentary function, in spite of the game's possible resonance with a documentary form.

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[43] The argument that position the photographic image as exceptional for its indexical qualities often stems interpretation of the philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce and/or certain readings of Andre Bazin. For more on this see Tom Gunning, "Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality," *differences* 18, no. 1 (2007). Also see Charles S. Peirce and James Hoopes, *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

[44] Lev Manovich argues that film in the age of the digital image, the photograph has lost its "privileged indexical relationship to pro-filmic reality" because of its pixilated materiality, a form which does not distinguish an artificial origin from a pro-filmic origin. He goes further to argue that "cinema can no longer be clearly distinguished from animation" and "has become a sub-genre of painting. This is similar to a point made by Bill Nichols. See Manovich, *Language*, 254. Also see Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, 149-55. My point is simply that even the filmic image is suspect, it still functionally treated as a document recording historic reality which gains credibility from the indexical quality of the photographic image.

As the argument would go, the computer-generated images in a video game like *LA Noire* should not be equated with those from a live-action film like *The Naked City* precisely because any video game comprised of rendered, representational, mediated drawings which lack the primary link to what happened in the historical world. In this formulation, we should not equate *LA Noire's* computer generated version of Los Angeles' "Brown Derby" building and with the version the Brown Derby we see in photograph. Essentially, this line of thinking makes a fundamental distinction between a *rendered* version of a city and a *recorded* version of a city. Even if both *LA Noire* and *The Naked City* aim to create evidence of and from historical versions of their respective cities, *LA Noire's* digitally animated version is a mediated rendering of the city, while *The Naked City* records a version of the world that can be functionally experienced as evidence of a time and place that existed in our historic world. (If nothing else, the camera's apparatus at least records the process of making a movie.) Meanwhile, the rendering of Los Angeles in *LA Noire* would ostensibly always maintain the status of a metaphor—even at its most rhetorically realistic, it would still be experienced merely *like* a version the historical world.

The question is, if the images in a video game like *LA Noire* have a different relationship with the world than those of film—if they lack the same existential bond with the historical world—does that preclude them from being experienced as images that contain truth claims about our historical world? Can *LA Noire* still provide evidence to produce an argument about the historical world—Nichol's idea of the documentary function—if those images are not comprised of indexical images *of and from* the historical world? If so, how would this work?

Without disregarding the relevance of the material distinction between recording and rendering, perhaps Nichol's notion that the same filmic image could be used to either "support" fictional narrative or "support" a documentary argument substantiates a more flexible notion of the

documentary function than one that relies on indexicality. In *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, when Andersen constructs what he calls a "city symphony in reverse" assembling a historical, documentary version of Los Angeles using footage culled from popular fictional films shot on location*,* part of what he demonstrates is how fictional filmic images can be transformed to reveal a documentary function in their periphery. That is, the same images of Los Angeles used to support a metaphoric, fictional version of Los Angeles could operate, within a different rhetoric, to make an argument about the historical version of Los Angeles. That is, if we notice the importance of context and reception—if we focus on the experience that occurs during the aesthetic encounter—the material distinctions between rendering and documenting seem less relevant.

The elder Donlan's firsthand account playing *LA Noire*—driving around familiar streets in utter nostalgic reverie—seems to support the notion that the moving image documentary function lies not in how an image was made, but in how that image is experienced. To understand this better, let us return to Donlan's father's articulation of his experience in playing *LA Noire*:

> *For a few hours I was able to re-explore the LA I knew in the late forties and early fifties with my son. The city was dark, but even with the period's dim street lighting and within the slightly truncated map of the city, we were able to find our way around. … I was able to remember exactly how to get around from both the towering City Hall and the slightly uncomfortable space of Pershing Square. This seemed a refreshingly thoughtful-almost intellectual-scenario that I would not have expected in something called a game.*[45]

For Donlan's father, *LA Noire's* version of Los Angeles somehow maintains a primary connection to the historical world: the once existent "slightly uncomfortable spaces"—something that a recorded, filmic image may not have—are re-experienced through the sensorial occurrence of playing *LA Noire*. In this way, the documentary function—in which images make arguments about the historical world—seems to be less directly fueled by the image's production or its material indexical bond, but

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[45] Donlan, "Night and the City".

instead based on something much more particular about how we experience the world and how those experiences can be externally referenced in the act of reception. For Donlan's father, this process is quite personal, something that has to do with his own memory and familiarity of a time and place that could be brought back through an experience of the moving image. The distinction between the filmed and the rendered city is largely effaced when we turn our object of inquiry to the kinds of experiences which these media engender.

For Donlan's father, the rendered city is experienced as evidence of his personal version of the historic world, not unlike the way Anderson experiences his version of the historic Los Angeles through various fictional versions. That is, *LA Noire's* Los Angeles which is fictional to most, is experienced as a trace of an actual lived occurrence for the elder Donlan, indicating that, under certain circumstances, rendered images, those which have been mediated and plasticized, can still somehow provide a documentary function. In Donlan's case, the circumstances seem idiosyncratic, but, arguably, within the right kind of rhetoric—a video game version of a documentary rhetoric—it seems plausible that a broader range of reception could experience the rendered images within video games with a documentary function (i.e. as evidence in a way that can still support arguments about the historical world).[46] None of this is to say that *LA Noire's* potential to produce a documentary function should be understood as functioning precisely the same as it does in film. If anything, Donlan's description begins to illustrate what makes the experience of playing a video game so different from watching a film precisely because it emphasizes something about time and space.

To explore this idea further, *LA Noire's* adaptation of *The Naked City* provides a particularly lucid way to begin exploring possible attributes of a video game documentary function. Specifically,

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[46] This is an idea that D.L Maheiu essentially imagines when he describes "new type of historical archive" which we will experience through an "increasingly an immersive, multi-sensory activity, bound inevitably by the limitations of its authors, but relived in ways that traditional written narratives could never capture." D. L. LeMahieu, "Digital Memory, Moving Images, and the Absorption of Historical Experience," *Film & History* 41, no. 1 (2011): 82.

looking at parallel narrative sequences from both versions—for example, the moment when the lead detectives are assigned to investigate a murder and they make their way to the crime scene—illustrates how differently these forms relate to time and space. In *The Naked City,* the sequence takes place in a succinct series of shots, paradigmatic of classical Hollywood efficiency, we see 1) one of the lead detectives exits his commanders' office, 2) a police car pulls up to a building before the lead detectives exit the car and walk to that building, and 3) the detectives exit an elevator and walk through a hall to an apartment door. As a fine illustration of the classic Hollywood editing style, the sequences contain three economical shots separated by two dissolves; the film's narration has moved the narrative from the police precinct to the crime scene while simultaneously communicating a number of interrelated details about the characters and the city itself in a span of less than 20 seconds. The two dissolves in this sequence in *The Naked City* operate as ellipses, used to indicate the absence—but implied existence—of the quotidian interstices of time and space that the narration omits.

The distinctiveness in experiencing *LA Noire's* version of the world, meanwhile, is found precisely in these interstices. Playing *LA Noire's* case of "The Naked City" begins with a marked cut-scene of the detectives being assigned the case and beginning to exit the commander's office. Where the film dissolves, though, the game transitions out of the cinematic mode by cutting to familiar third-person perspective behind Phelps as he is walking out of his commander's office, indicating to players that they are now in control. Because it is an open-world video game, *LA Noire* now provides players with agency to make their way to the crime scene or, alternatively, to travel anywhere else in the game world. This entails controlling Phelps as he navigates the halls of the police station, gets into a car in the parking lot, and drives through the streets with his partner to the crime scene—a sequence which, if rushed, takes a few minutes, but is essentially indefinite. After yet

another marked cut-scene occurs providing an establishing shot of an apartment building, followed by three shots successively tighter shots showing Phelps and his partner getting out of the car and walking up to the building, the game returns the familiar third-person perspective, and players' agency is returned. When approached, a uniformed police officer outside the building says simply "second floor, apartment six" and players' next tasks are to guide Phelps up a flight of stairs to find the apartment in question.

If the description of this sequence in the game seems tedious, then it begins to capture players' concurrent experience throughout many of seemingly interstitial moments of *LA Noire*. The Los Angeles of *LA Noire* is experienced in a very different manner from a filmic version of a city in part because players can experience those the moments in between shots—those wearisome moments of a realistic depiction of time and space in a city that would sink momentum in a classical Hollywood narrative or even a documentary.[47] One of the points *Los Angeles Plays Itself* really emphasizes is the way Los Angeles is almost always spatially misrepresented on film—what Andersen calls the "geographical license" that films take when, in one of his examples, a "car chase jump[s] from the Venice canals to the Los Angeles harbor thirty miles away." The idea is that while narrative films take poetic license in their depiction of space (amongst many other things) they might still call their location "Los Angeles," while misrepresenting the city spatially. Part of the point is that the Los Angeles depicted through film—fictional or otherwise—never remains one continuous space shot through long uninterrupted takes; it is of course depicted through basic editing conventions that foreshorten the city for the sake of a continuous narrative or for convenience.

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[47] I say "can" because the player is at times given the choice to let his partner drive and thus, "skip over" the driving sequences. The designers of *LA Noire* must have realized the tediousness of driving such long distances within their Los Angeles because after a few cases, the player is given the option to ride as a passenger, providing the player with the option to cut over the travel time between areas with a tap of a button. This feature, known as "quick travelling," is a regular convention in video games for allowing players to skip over tedious journeys in open-world games.

LA Noire's interest in presenting a historical version of Los Angeles means that players particularly experiences those uneventful ellipses which would be edited out of a parallel cinematic sequence. While players may, like the elder Donlan, marvel at the city while driving around, it quickly becomes something of a chore to spend upwards of 20 minutes driving a period car through traffic from one end of the city to the other. It is also during these moments that players have Phelps driving or walking down some of the more unremarkable streets of Los Angeles: those which were not meticulously designed based on actual buildings like the landmarks of the city, but are instead based on general types. We see repeating housing structures, the indistinguishable storefronts, and billboards advertising the same products over and over, to get from one point to another. Perhaps this is a depiction of Los Angeles, which seemingly resonates a bit more with Reyner Banham's version of the city, is in fact more akin to one's lived experience in which the liminal spaces of our version of any city can pass by without providing any sort of real impression. This "filler" urban space is bounded by iconic, recognizable, and historically accurate places which may even feel more true to one's memory: landmarks with characteristic, but not necessarily memorable, fabric in between.[48]

Regardless of the reasoning behind the decision not to model these streets meticulously, what we can understand here is that the imagery and architecture are sometimes secondary to the sense of producing an accurate experience of a city by traveling through extended distances over periods of time. In fact, it is because the game's restricted narration stays so rigidly tied to Phelps that we experience the city's sprawling spatial coherence and its geographical precision. The city as a

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[48] Schweizer makes the seemingly related point that by arguing that "using indexical references, games can develop senses of place by diagetically [sic] referring to locations and objects already imbued with strong meaning. See Schweizer, "Videogame Cities in Motion," 204.
For more on this idea see Ian Bogost and Dan Klainbaum's essay "Experiencing place in Los Santos and Vice City" in Nate Garrelts, *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto : Critical Essays* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2006).

subject matter is primed to trigger such traces of memory because it presents a spatial index reminiscent of the experience of the masses of people that cohabited the same spaces of the urban environment at the same moment. When we see an iconic building like the Los Angeles Public Library in the game, it is not *being shown* or narrated to us—we narrate it ourselves. We might approach it slowly on foot as Phelps remains a few blocks away at the corner of Wilshire and Figueroa. As he walks along the city's sidewalks, we struggle to see it from our restrained perspective and as it remains optically obstructed by the surrounding architecture and infrastructure. It takes time to walk around the building, and it feels all that much more colossal when we get up close to it. The spatial configuration of built environment, despite being rendered, can still evoke an experience of being a tiny presence in a much larger space, the feelings of being a lost soul in a much larger city.

What I am suggesting is that video games can maintain qualities of presenting historic version of city back to us in spite of their digital and manufactured qualities—whether filmed or rendered, a moving image can provide a documentary function as long as it resonates with our cognitive, affective, and phenomenological experience of the historical world. Admittedly, by privileging notions of receptive experiences over any material, ontological qualities, I seem to be fostering a pretty relativistic and somewhat circular notion of what it means to document the historical world. That is to say, I recognize that my point here assumes that if the spectator experiences the image as one of and from the historic world—however mendacious this image may be may be—then this image is, in some sense, a "documentary image." Perhaps, though, this merely recognizes the ways in which the documentary function has always hinged on relativistic experience and receptive context. After all, the documentary image should not be synonymous with the historical accuracy or truth; characterizing something as a documentary image indicates only that it contains *truth claims*. What is more, they can really only be understood this way if spectators have a

frame of reference to recognize them as such (without a frame of reference, a spectator may not be able to perceive whether a given image is supposed to represent a version of the historical world or of a fictional world.).

My aim here is not to make arguments for what media forms are capable of presenting something historically accurate; it is to think about how images can be (re)presented to us in a way so that we experience those images as of and from the historical world, images that can present versions *of* the historical world by presenting images we take to be recordings *from* the historical world. Moreover, if photographs record a certain visual quality of a time and space, video games might be more suited to record other qualities that cannot be captured by the filmic image. As we continue this line of thinking, we should explore the ways that a video game like *LA Noire,* with its spatial coherence and adherence to a largely continuous experience of a historical city, seems suited record affective qualities related to scale, movement, spatial geography, topography, distance and maybe even architecture that the filmic image is less suited to record. That is to say, *LA Noire* perhaps suggests the video game form's potential to *record* affective qualities of a version of the historical city in its images, experiences that might literally be left on the cutting room floor of a movie production.

CONCLUSION
Experiencing Authored Expressions

5.1 DISCURSIVE CATEGORIES AND MEDIA

One principle preoccupation of this dissertation concerns instrumental cultural discourses which have neglected to think carefully about how video games fit into existing critical frameworks. That is, the effort to keep pace with the ascendant rise of video games as a dominant form of popular culture finds scholars struggling to carve a space for "game studies," the American legal system's adjudicating all video games in terms of protected speech, and museum curators classifying video games in their collections while largely failing to comprehend video games multifaceted relation to a range of material, experiential, technological, and aesthetic traditions. To an extent, my own continued reliance on the blanket label "video games"—as if this signifier constitutes a coherent group of objects—only reinforces this generalizing tendency. However, my aim throughout this dissertation has also been to disrupt principle assumptions about how video games should be critically comprehended going forward by formulating central questions about how video games relate to film studies in particular.

One of the most important assumptions I have worked to dispel is that even if video games could be tied together as a medium through a material-based definition, such a designation would do little to offer a stable or practical critical approach for these objects once we begin to think about them as forms of expression. This point is easier to illustrate with the hindsight of decades of scholarly conversations about film and moving images, where analogous medium-specific determinations have proven, at the very least, unproductive. Noël Carroll made a version of this

point clear some three decades ago when he explained that "the physical trait that essentially defines film,…its flexible celluloid base,…[does not] suggest…the kinds of things that could or should be represented or expressed in the medium."[49] Carroll's point is that the vast array of experiences evinced by film cannot be reduced to something divined from its material properties alone. This point runs counter to a trend of neo-materialist and object-oriented approaches to media studies exemplified by the work of Jussi Parrika and Matthew Kirschenbaum, but such phenomenology-phobic arguments have always seemed like an odd fit when it comes to thinking about objects that are culturally defined to begin with. When it comes to video games, medium -specific arguments have a tendency to minimize the range of expressions engendered, and overlook the historical, social, and political contexts in which these objects are both made and experienced.

Fortunately, the ever-evolving, humanities-centered, scholarly conversation unified around film—the discourse found in departments and programs with modifying labels like "media," "visual arts," "moving-image," "cinema," and "screen"—has thus far been flexible enough to acknowledge material distinctions without ensconcing impassible barriers between popular forms of media. This allows critical connections to be made between things like avant-garde 16mm films made by starving artists, live-television broadcasts only faintly recalled, streaming online recordings of competitive game *Dota 2* (Valve, 2013) matches, sexist beer commercials, feature-length documentaries, fetish pornography, network television sit-coms, repeating gifs, Hollywood CGI children's films, digitally-shot melodramas, and global art films among many other objects. What unites these expressions is not their materiality, their platforms, their means of productions, their aims, their distribution procedures, their exhibition spaces, their reception, or their media forms; they are seemingly united by the notion that each conveys ideas, information, or feelings through moving images, images

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[49] Carroll, "The Specificity of Media in the Arts," 7.

which are experienced and cognized by an audience. This point alone justifies a set of shared critical references and approaches.

Even still, this dissertation has never aimed to make an overly broad argument that all video games fit well within the discipline of film studies. Nor do I support ignoring key distinctions between video games and film. My goals center specifically on the observation that *certain* films and *certain* video games have far more in common with each other—in terms of how they are experienced—then each does with other objects common to their respective media. Put another way, the experiences engendered by certain films and video games converge enough to justify comprehending them within a largely shared critical framework. However, since I continue to qualify my argument by saying that only "certain" films and video games belong together, I should—by way of conclusion—better articulate this qualification.

5.1.1 Theorizing Experiences

In my introduction I explain that the prevailing narrative which places video games primarily within a lineage of other games—alongside activities like sports, board games, and schoolyard play—is problematic because it neglects to consider video games as media objects. Recognizing video games as media objects enables us to position them within a lineage of objects encoded with preplanned expressions. This allows us, for one thing, to understand video games cartridges more like LP records and DVDs than an analogue board game like chess. At the same time, overestimating the significance of video game's material properties can also be a mistake, which is why Carroll's point about the diversity of filmic expressions is an important lesson to keep in mind when considering the vast range of experiences that video games provide.

In this way, my dissertation critiques both injudicious generalizations about video games as games and generalizations about video games in terms of material properties. Instead, from the beginning of this dissertation, I suggest approaching video games through a consideration of how these objects are experienced. One potential problem with such an approach, however, is that it can seem like an equivocation that merely shifts generalizing claims over to interpretations of how video games are apprehended. After all, when it comes to theories of spectatorship in film studies, there is a perpetual tension between any specific claim about how a film works and the validity of other subjective responses.[50]

Still, film scholars continue to operate under the assumption that we can make defensible arguments about a given film based on a close reading of its form in conjunction with various critical theories of spectatorship. And while theories of reception may lack the consistency or self-assurance we find in arguments about materiality and medium specificity, theories of reception are admirable precisely because they acknowledge how experiences shift with historic, social, and political conditions. there is something appealing about approaching video games through such conditional theories; recognizing uncertainty and the need for ceaseless revision counters the video game industry's reliance on data analytics, mathematical probabilities, and statistical precision. Theories of

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[50] In the decades when film studies really secured its place in academia, the way to deal with the tension between formal interpretation and subjective receptive experience came in the form of the psychoanalytic and/or semiotic subject. This created a replicable spectatorial model, one that could be systematically discerned through a close formal analysis of a text combined with a suitable formula based on ideological and psychoanalytical subject formation. As time went on the subjects became more complicated as specialized modes of spectatorship (female spectatorship, queer spectatorship, etc.) came into usage as a way of critiquing a dominant, monolithic notion of the singular spectator—one whom detractors faulted for being too white and male—in favor of a more representational and egalitarian set of figures to characterize the reception end of the film encounter.

The problem with this reaction is that the increased need for specificity, means that subcategories of spectators could be divided ad infinitum with little satisfaction. Meanwhile the text itself is increasingly diminished as a site of import for deducing meaning. What we are left with is a range of theories and theorists navigating a precarious spectrum defined primarily by where they view the site where meaning is should be derived.

experience are helpful precisely because they admit their drawbacks and qualifications, and, in doing so, they also critique any claims of objectivity.

This recognition of uncertainty also provides the background for my suggestion that the specific films and video games which warrant a shared critical framework are those that are *experienced as authored expressions*. This is an idea I reference throughout this dissertation. Here I can draw on some of the key lessons from the previous chapters in order to better explain this formulation.

In Chapter 1 I establish that the "author" of an *authored expression* refers to Foucault's notion of the "author function," a practical focal point for enabling a mode of critical reception in relation to reading a cultural object as a text. The author is a projection on the part of the beholders, one that orients how a text is comprehended by serving as a guarantor for the beholder's assumption that the film or video game has been encoded with some purposive expression. Another relevant point for my configuration of film and video games concerns the perceived aims of the expression. Chapter 2 discusses how design objects are understood quite differently from aesthetic objects primarily on the basis of perceived functionality. Both design objects and aesthetic objects are purposively created, but design objects are perceived to have a functional purpose, whereas the purpose of the aesthetic objects is abstract, debatable, or perhaps ultimately unknowable. In this sense, those video games and films experienced as authored expressions should be identified with aesthetic objects, in that both are comprehended to have been purposively created, yet the nature of that purpose is the subject of some debate.

We might recall, however, that our assessment of video games in terms of functionality is complicated by the fact that, as complex computational forms, they are effectively comprised of many individually designed components that must function together in order to be playable. Thanks

in part to the analysis of Chapter 3, however, we understand that most films might similarly be anatomized into individually functional components. We might, for instance, break down a narrative film in to elements like the print itself, the projector, the costumes, the set design, the editing, the spatial compositions, the narrative structure, and the dialogue, understanding all of these as functional components that work in concert to create a comprehensible experience.[51]

Perhaps more than anything, the fact that both film and video games can be understood as a collection of functional components reminds us that distinctions between design and art are often subject to context and critical norms. This is one reason it is difficult to make any definitive claims about which video games and films will be experienced as authored expressions. Still, it is important to recognize the formal characteristics and critical contexts which engender certain films and video games to be apprehended as such. I would like to compare films and video games further in this regard because it provides an instructive way to understand both where these media overlap and where they diverge.

5.1.2 Filmmaking as Authoring Images

Are all photographs authored expressions? Are all photographs perceived as authored expressions? These questions may be more difficult to parse than they seem at first. One of the most important myths among film theorists has long been that some part of film's power is drawn from the recognition that photographic images may—on some level—be perceived as lacking conscious mediation. One way of thinking about this idea is through David Rodowick's fairly extreme

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[51] It is worth recognizing work of this nature produced within critical rigid structuralist approaches like where films broken down into functional components to understand how the larger object "works."

suggestions in *The Virtual Life of Film* which seemingly privileges the photographic image's indexical function above all else:

> *This transcription is inseparable from the automated processes of a time-bound fixing of reflected light spatially organized by a lens. In other words, as an automated instrument, the camera is designed to register and preserve a profilmic event to which it was once present. The photograph has no sense apart from this function. The photochemical reaction to reflected light takes place continuously throughout the photogram in a given unit of time, which then persists as a trace or index, preserving the framed event as a record of spatial duration fixed in a homogeneous substance. As a result of its particular circumstances of production, this index is very much a historical document.*[52]

For Rodowick, the fact that the photograph's existence may depend on a purposive subject positioning a camera in a particular place, taking the actual picture, and developing the film negative, does not change the very nature behind the camera's function of passively recording a time and space. In this view, the camera's indexical capacity stems from a reflexive chemical production which traces the historical world, without regard to content or context. The camera's ability to document a moment—or successive moments, as it may be—provides an unconscious vestige that exists without forethought, intention, or design.[53]

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[52] David Norman Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), 55-56.

[53] In this way, Rodowick's logic here shares something with the neo-materialists stemming from Ernst and Kittler discussed in Chapter 1. This conception is seemingly unconcerned with the human perception, only in the material index which reflexively records via media lacking an adulterating will. Implicit is a certain technological determinism blind to the vast range of experiences provided by different subject matter of images.

Benjamin's quote about how "photography freed the hand," raised in the previous chapter suggests that photography effectively removes a layer of mediation within the artistic practice of image making because from the most important artistic tasks in the process of pictorial reproduction—tasks that now devolved upon the eye alone." At first glance this passage seems to indicate a way that authorship is removed in pictorial reproduction as the artist's intercession, symbolized by the "hand," is excised from the process. However, we should note that when Benjamin places the onus of pictorial reproduction on the "eye alone," he is not referring to the camera's eye but the artist's eye: "since the eye perceives more swiftly than the hand can draw, the process of pictorial reproduction was enormously accelerated, so that it could now keep pace with speech."[53] In this sense, photography is a technological development providing a more streamlined process of image production for Benjamin, still human subjectivity is never quite eliminated from the process. Even when a split-second camera shutter is triggered through an automated mechanical procedure, it is a human subject who has invented the camera, who placed the camera, who will develop the film, and who will behold the eventual image. Benjamin, Eiland, and Smith, *Selected Writings*, 3, 102.

More relevant for this dissertation, Rodowick considers the photographic image's existence as a "historical document" to be distinct, or perhaps even *contrary*, to its capacity to be apprehended as an aesthetic object. This is because the photographic image's indexicality lacks "autographicality" and "notationality," two attributes which Rodowick argues are "functional concepts defining the aesthetic nature of creative acts." We should note that categories of "autographicality" and "notationality" respectively parallel "authored" and "expressive," so Rodowick's effectively argues is that the photographic image cannot be perceived as an *authored expression* precisely because of its historical function. Put another way, the photographic image's automated processing justifies conceiving of the image more like a found object, rather than one purposively created to engender an experience. this line of thinking leads Rodowick to ponder the "terrible conclusion [that] every art has aesthetic value except film."[54]

While Rodowick's determinism regarding the photographic image is problematic for a few reasons,[55] his extreme suggestion helps articulate the more modest point that filmic images might be perceived as lacking authored expression. surveillance footage or the images captured by a malfunctioning camera are just two relatable examples to consider along these lines. Here we find images that exist as indexical traces and evidence, but lack a sense that they were consciously created. Even if the images are beautiful, so long as we know their origin we will not apprehend them as authored expression. This is not to say that these images cannot subsequently be

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[54] Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 15-16. Rodowick derives "autographicality" and "notationality" in part from Nelson Goodman. In many ways Rodowick's logic aligns with the conception of the aesthetic object that I have been developing through this dissertation: an object must be apprehended as an authored expression in order to provide an aesthetic experience.

[55] Where my account diverges most acutely from Rodowick's is in his assumption that the photographs' ontological properties are paramount in distinguishing between film and digital images including those of video games. As my attention has always been about how the objects or images are apprehended and experienced, the ontological is only as determinate as much it is perceptible and as much as it shapes the conditions of how that image is experienced. This is not to deny film's indexicality as potential factor of reception; only that indexicality does not alone determine how the image will be experienced.

apprehended as authored expressions either by mistake or by their placement into a new context, but, without cause or context, these images will continue to function as historical documents and indexical traces, and will not be apprehended as authored expressions.

Filmmaking in this sense is effectively the process by which photographic images are charged with significance, provided with a context and understanding that allows us to experience the images as authored expressions. When we watch films under the supposition that they are authored, we implicitly apprehend these images as mediated, chosen, and manufactured to provide some subsequent experience.[56] Realizing this allows us to articulate the notion that film and video games are at their greatest ontological and experiential distance from one another at their respective inceptions.

5.1.3 Video Game Orientations

When I claim that only certain films and video games are experienced as authored expressions, I imply that not all films and video games will be perceived in this manner. As I have just pointed out, films in theory can avoid this mode of reception because we do not necessarily assume that the images captured are the product of deliberate design. Consequently, the idea that some video games will not be experienced as authored expressions is seemingly complicated by Eric Zimmerman's astute observation relayed in Chapter 1 that, unlike many analog games, all video games are "deliberately designed." Zimmerman's point is that analog games —like jump-rope, soccer, or "go fish"—are not so much consciously devised, as they "evolve" over time (more like a folktale in an oral story-telling tradition). a video game, on the other hand, can only exist—it can only be

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[56] Even the accidental photograph can be beheld as an authored expression. For example, this image can be provided with an anterior significance once it is placed into a meaningful context (like a found object). Also, the accidental photo may apprehended mistakenly to have been created with intentionality.

experienced—if some person or group of people intentionally coded and calculated it as a video game to be playable on some computational platform.[57] This point remains true even in regard to video games ported from pre-existing analog games—computer solitaire must still be deliberately designed to render it operable as a video game.[58] At the same time, it is important to recognize what is "deliberately designed" is not always experienced as an authored expressions.

One way of thinking about this is that while video games are composed from deliberately designed components, these components can be organized in such a way that any sense of their deliberate design—and room for the sense of author's expression—will be effectively displaced. One way of understanding this idea is through the claim I made in Chapter 1 concerning the importance of recognizing vast differences in mode of gameplay engendered by games. As I argued then, video games that operate chiefly through the gameplay modes of competition and/or chance—Caillois' categories of *agôn* and *alea*—will not be apprehended in terms of authorship (which is why these video games have significantly less in common with film). The chief reason for this is that these types of games are composed in a way so that the game's makers actually relinquishes significant agency and control. That is, whereas *The Stanley Parable* helped demonstrate that many video games provide what is mostly an illusion of ceding agency, games operating through competition and chance actually forfeit enough control that the experiences engendered are credited to someone besides an author figure.

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[57] Elias, Garfield, and Gutschera, *Characteristics of Games*, 4-5.

[58] It is worth noting that the very existence of video game ports of preexisting analog games like solitaire allows us to better recognize more than one design act within the development of a video game. On the one hand there is the abstracted design of the game itself, with its rules and procedures. On the other hand, there is the design of the computer program which expresses that game as a playable form. To the extent the computer program's design could be compared to cinematography or set-design or perhaps the craft of carving a marble chess set, is a question worth considering further at some other point.

In competition-based video games we find room for player agency through scenarios and encounters which are enabled—but not directed—by the game itself. In competition-based video games like *StarCraft* (Blizzard, 1998), *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve, 2012), the FIFA soccer (EA Sports) series, and *Super Smash Bros. Melee* (HAL Laboratory, 2001), players primarily understand themselves engaged with other players and are into thinking about the game in terms of fate or competition.[59] Once players fully comprehend the rules of the game and the arena which they are operating within, their orientations turn away from the game's composition and toward their opponents. At this point, the range of experiences within the game are not traced back to some presumed creator's master plan; instead, the players' focuses are on one another. In this way, video games operating primarily through either chance or competition enable a wide range of experiences that will remain unmanaged to some extent. They do little to encourage—or actively work against—players thinking about games as authored expression precisely because any sense that what occurs is a function of some premeditated plan detracts from the sense of fair competition.

We find a somewhat different orientation altogether when it comes to games involving chance. Whereas competition games orient players toward attributing their experiences to themselves and one another, video games based purely in chance, such as video poker or video slot machines, orient players to attribute their experiences to fate rather than some imaginary author. This becomes much more complicated, however, when single-player adventure video games begin incorporating elements of *chance* into the compositions of their worlds through advanced computation. In these specific games the line between what we can attribute to the conscious decisions of some author function become quite muddled.

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[59] Games of pure chance we can think of in terms of machines used for gambling. Competition-based games would include many of the most popular multiplayer-games that dominate much of the industry and the entire range of games now being professionalized as "e-sports."

While there are a few ways developers use stochastic elements, the technique with perhaps the broadest potential applicability is what is called "*procedurally generated content.*" This refers to a technique in game design in which aspects of a game are not created through the precisely calculated efforts of any individual or purposive author but through an algorithmic system and intersecting rules. The scheme is calculated to contain contingency and a degree of random variation within a larger set of rules. While the degree of randomization depends on how much a particular system relies on procedurally generated content, in some games the very environment is generated algorithmically, and procedural generation allows a computer to adhere to certain underlying design conditions or principles built into an algorithm to produce random, essentially unique variations. In effect, it a system capable of creating game worlds that are somehow simultaneously predictable and unpredictable, controlled and free, involving prefigured, infinitely variable components within a set of parameters.

In video games like the influential *Rogue* (Michael Toy; Glenn Wichman; Ken Arnold,1980)*, NetHack* (Mike Stephenson, 1987), *Spelunky* (Derek Yu, 2008), *Minecraft*, *The Binding of Isaac* (Edmund McMillen, Florian Himsl, 2011) and *No Man's Sky* (Hello Games, 2016), procedural generation becomes the driving mechanism behind creating environments that are both meticulously adherent to a kind of reproducible order, yet infinite and inconstant. In each of these games, the central configuration of the game world along with many other components which greatly shape the player's affective experience, are not manually configured by any specific designer, but instead calculated stochastically through fairly complex algorithms designed to balance randomness and coherence. This allows environments to maintain standard properties and to abide by a set of conditions, but also ensure that no specific manifestation is certain. The spaces are built probabilistically—so that uncertainly, chance, contingency, and a range of disorder can be features

of the design. The rule-based parameters provide infinite variable possibilities, within a finitely

defined space.

Rogue, Minecraft, and No Man's Sky also illustrate how the potential scale of procedural

generation has progressed by orders of magnitudes over the past few decades. As a pioneering video

game to use procedural generation, the 1981 game Rogue's graphically rudimentary style renders a

distinct dungeon layout for each and every playthrough of the game. Within the defined limits, there

will be different size rooms, different kinds of rooms, different numbers of rooms, different items,

different enemies, etc. Even in this case, when the architectural configurations operate within a

relatively limited number of parameters, each playthrough provides a novel experience of

discovering, navigating and exploring a unique spatial configuration. That is to say, procedural

generation provides a way for the video game to be simultaneously authored and unauthored.

Figure 5.1-A Examples of variations in dungeon layouts in *Rogue* in its original ASCII style

By the time, *Minecraft* comes along some thirty years later, the equivalent of the procedurally generated dungeon in *Rogue* is now a navigable environment several times larger than the surface of earth.[60] The variation within the designed environment is also vastly more complex compared to *Rogue*, as each time the player loads a new world in *Minecraft* it creates a unique landscape containing variable formations of forests, mountains, caverns, seas, villages, among other eco-systems. Unlike *Rogue*, *Minecraft* does not necessarily provide its player with a predetermined goal, so the world is there to be inhabited, reshaped, and explored. This gameplay style essentially allows endless reconfigurations of the world as long as those configurations abide by the properties of the in-game materials provided. *Minecraft's* "blocky" graphical style and geometrical simplicity in the basic underlying shapes, orthogonal structures, and unrefined textures, enable scalability and endless reproducibility, yet the game maintains variable iterative schemas. Consequently, *Minecraft's* promise is that exploring the environment will involve discovering and cataloguing the existence of environments that no one else—not even the game's designers—have previously encountered.

Figure 5.1-B *Minecraft* (as it looked in 2011)

In video games that include computationally assisted procedural generation, we learn that customizability and variation are effectively strategies used to offset a mass-produced schema's

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[60] Jeff Marchiafava, "How Big Is a Minecraft World," Game Informer, http://www.gameinformer.com/b/news/archive/2012/02/09/how-big-is-a-minecraft-world.aspx.

tendency towards uniformity and authorial control. These games are rhetorically centered on catering to the individual user's experience by providing each player a sense of ownership over their own destiny and removing the sense that their experience is the subject of some author's expression. The extent to which the games mentioned have been successful in this regard is debatable, but the existence of them allows us to better articulate the qualities of an authorial expression.

What it helps us recognize is that for most video games to be experienced as authored expressions, they must provide the player with the sense that the games can effectively be "beaten," mastered, or finished. This is less about the game having an actual end than the player being able to operate under the assumption that there is an end-point, that that players will be able to discern the edges of what has been designed, and, in theory, encounter the entirety of the world that can be uncovered. The created worlds must be experienced as finite worlds and embedded with histories and unfolding narratives, placed there by some conscious agent. Players' orientations shift when elements of the experience are thought to be random or wholly contingent on their own actions. This is effectively the same tension inherent in increasingly dynamic artificial intelligence and machine learning. Although a designer may code an initial algorithm, that logic can surpass the expectations of the designer to the extent that the logic mass-produces experiences that the designer has no control over. While the existence of these games provides an interesting avenue to explore further, it does not stop us from recognizing that most single-player video games are still effectively experienced as authored expressions.

5.2 CRITICAL GAMES

So, what does it mean to experience films and video games as authored expressions? Why is it helpful to recognize these forms together as such? In "What is an Author?" Foucault argues that "if

a text should be discovered in a state of anonymity—whether as a consequence of an accident or the author's explicit wish—the game becomes one of rediscovering the author."[61] Foucault refers to a somewhat literal process, but he is also outlining the premise behind a critical orientation essential to convey what it means to experience films and video games together as authored expressions. In this approach, beholders imagine themselves as engaged with objects they assume to have been encoded as meaningful though someone's conscious act. In this mode, both films and video games are structured as play-spaces, spaces we assume to have been devised according to an author's plan. Even if this plan is imaginary, it allows a reception geared to "rediscovering" the affordances and parameters embedded within the text.

We play video games because they are already thought of in terms of terms of objects that are planned out ahead of time by a conscious author. In this way, we are oriented to them as if they can be solved or completed.[62] Still, because we think of this activity as a game, we are granted a freedom to experiment and find new strategies and creative ways to work toward a sense of resolution. This is similar to how film critics operate under similar conditions when they make arguments about a given film's "meaning." We orient ourselves to the film as if it is something playable, as if it is a puzzle. There is a larger argument to make about how any aesthetic object should be thought of in terms of gameplay, both in terms of the aesthetic experience but also in terms of the formal discursive strategies we use to critically engage with that object. The aesthetic encounter designates a particular relationship between an object and its beholder, one in which the

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[61] Foucault and Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, 109.

[62] Theoretically some competitive games can be solved in that one can devise an optimal strategy. In fact, some games can be "solved" to different degrees. "*Ultra-weakly solved* means that the game-theoretic value of the initial position has been determined, *weakly solved* means that for the initial position a strategy has been determined to achieve the game-theoretic value against any opposition, and *strongly solved* is being used for a game for which such a strategy has been determined for all legal positions." H Jaap Van den Herik, Jos WHM Uiterwijk, and Jack Van Rijswijck, "Games Solved: Now and in the Future," *Artificial Intelligence* 134, no. 1 (2002).

beholder experiences the object as simultaneously intentional and mysterious, meaningful and purposeless, definite yet endlessly vague. To an extent, what we apprehend as the aesthetic object itself provides a kind of game-space or arena in providing some of the conditions of its reception. When we formulate an interpretive framework, we are devising rules for yet another sub-game or strategy to be played. Concepts like medium-specificity, genre and other interpretive frameworks can be understood as enabling game strategies. At the same time gameplay can productively be used to help us understand the way we engage the aesthetic object in a manner that speaks to the creative agency implicit within the act of reception.

The way one critically approaches a video game compared to a film is determined less by the form itself, than it is by the way we conceive of the form. Conceptualizing video games as authored expressions is not about rediscovering a literal author or working towards a specific end-point; rather, it is about recognizing an experiential orientation that is already present in the form. The assumption that the medium of video games impedes or negates the possibility of even rhetorically imagining an author is a key problem with the way these video games have been critically understood. Properly assessing a given video game, like a film, requires a close reading and, more broadly, a better sense of what can be understood as the text of the video game form. As I have demonstrated through this dissertation, video games contain much of the same elements of receptive experiences found in our experience of film and thus the lessons of film studies are vital to understanding this wide-ranging medium. At the same time, we can also recognize how video games create new formal, ontological and affective positions—some of which can be accounted for in film studies and others which require more thought and engagement with other fields.

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