

Beyond the Author: Collaborative Authorship in Video Games

Research Thesis

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by

Kim Lemon

The Ohio State University  
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Project Advisor: Professor Robert Hughes, Department of English

## Introduction:

In recent years, video games have become part of mainstream American society – references to games appear in conversation almost as frequently (and in some cases more frequently) as references to movies, the rise of smartphones and mobile gaming allows many to game on the go, and the stigma around playing video games has largely disappeared. However, despite such developments, video games are rarely taken as objects of critical and academic analysis. Though a critical theory and study of the video game medium has slowly begun to make its way into some academic and analytical circles under the name of ‘Game Studies,’ and though researchers and critical thinkers in this field apply the same analytical theories used for literature and film to video games (Căşvean 51), the majority of academics have continued to ignore the medium as a subject for critical analysis in favor of more established media. There are several reasons why this may be the case: a lack of time or interest on the part of critics to devote to the study of a new medium, a (misguided) notion that new methods of analysis must be formed to examine these new objects, or simply the outdated prejudices held by many critics and embodied by film critic Roger Ebert's remark that "video games can never be art."

Whatever the reason, the lack of critical analysis being done on video games is a missed opportunity for critical and academic fields to engage in a new medium demonstrating new and alternative modes of expression. Dismissing these works as narratively simplistic, critically immature, or a product focused solely on entertainment and economic success is reflective of the same kind of critical opposition that film faced early on (and which has since proven to be absolutely false). What work is being done on video games, through game studies and other fields beginning to branch out into the medium, is proving that, much like film, video games

have a lot to offer to academic and critical studies. Even if only by applying established methods of analysis and using existing critical theories to examine works in this medium, critics will find that video games are a valuable addition to critical discussions because they can provide counter-examples or complicate established notions of mediality. Just as with film, literature, and other creative media, critics explore video games to seek out the cultural significance of the works examined, placing them alongside established artworks in other fields.

However, what critical work on video games is beginning to show is how video games are bringing new and interesting perspectives to existing critical inquiries or posing new inquiries altogether. One of these critical discussions, and what this thesis intends to explore, is how video games are challenging traditional notions of authorship. Through the interactivity that is at the core of gameplay, and through technological and developmental innovations as game makers explore the narrative potentials inherent in the medium, there is an interesting phenomenon in which the player is taking an ever more active role in the narrative, becoming a far more active collaborator than in cinema and literature. Many games are built around systems in which player actions and choices can dramatically alter narrative outcomes (e.g. *Mass Effect*, *Until Dawn*). Others are designed such that the real narrative is only discovered when the player defies the initially perceived narrative (e.g. *The Stanley Parable*). Still others are built around the idea of the game as an experience, with any kind of narrative only implied (e.g. *Journey*). An exploration of these elements of game design and narrative structure, bringing in philosophical notions of authorship and art, will help to reveal how all of this is working and why it is so appealing to audiences.

The first step in undergoing an analysis of the unique narrative potential of video games, and the focus of part one of this thesis, lies in providing a more rigorous proof that the medium is worthy of critical analysis, which will be accomplished in part by showing that video games, like other media, have artistic potential. Through an examination of the evolution of storytelling in video games, touching on different genres and narrative styles, this first section will explore how the medium began by mimicking the narrative structures of literature and cinema, and it will be shown how the medium is bound by many of the same storytelling rules and employs the same kind of narrative devices as these other media. Part two will then proceed by focusing on how video games have and are continuing to evolve beyond the narrative styles of film and literature, examining the unique storytelling structures and elements of narrative made possible by the medium.

However, the main point of interest for this thesis, and the focus of the final section, lies in the notion of collaborative authorship as seen through the phenomena of multiplayer games. These involve an even more complicated concept of authorship, with many individual players collaborating within a game space, all influencing the narrative outcome. The ultimate form of these kinds of collaborative multiplayer games are those which have no existing narrative of their own (or a very skeletal one), the narrative instead created entirely by the players and their interactions with each other within the game space. This kind of collaborative authorship between players, facilitated by the structures and systems of so-called "sandbox" games (e.g. *Minecraft*, *Gmod*, *DayZ*), is where traditional notions of narrative and authorship really start to break down. The narrative becomes a communal effort where there is no one 'true' author, something much more akin to a jazz performance: a composer (creator, director, game studio)

forms the basic architecture of the work (narrative, setting, game mechanics) within which the players operate, interacting in real time with each other and with the work to create a unique performance (gameplay session) that changes each time the piece (game) is played.

The interactive medium of video games places the audience – the reader, the player, the consumer – in a unique position, challenging traditional notions of authorship and blurring the lines between author/creator and audience/player. In many ways, video games share more parallels with performance art than literature or film. Through this examination of the nature of narrative in video games, we may be able to learn more about our communal tendencies and the potentials of narrative that cannot be expressed through more traditional artforms.

#### I. The Critical Value of Video Games

A serious discussion and critical analysis of the narrative potential of video games necessitates that, first of all, the medium is recognized as having critical value. However, video games, like film before them, face skepticism and prejudice in the world of critical analysis due to their mainstream popularity and economic success. Film overcame this barrier once the medium was recognized for its capability to produce works of art. Therefore, the discussion will begin with an attempt to prove that, similarly, video games are capable of achieving, or at the least, striving for artistry, and thus, that they are just as worthy of critical analysis as film or literature.

The best way to begin to conceptualize the artistic value of video games is to compare the medium to its closest cousin, film. Much like film, not all video games reach or even aspire to the level of art; just as the film industry is filled with works whose primary focus is to

entertain (and by so doing, to make money), many games are solely produced as objects of entertainment. No serious film critic would try to claim that all cinematic works are worthy of consideration as works of art – there is a very wide gap between something with true, undeniable artistic merit like *Citizen Kane* and formulaic, cash-grab drivel like *Transformers*. However, the existence of non-artistic films does not negate the artistic potential of the entire medium; similarly, just because there are games that are not aiming for artistry does not mean that the medium as a whole is incapable of it. In addition, it must be noted that video games as an industry and creative medium are still in their infancy: the first video game was made in 1962, they became popularized in the 1980s, and have attained only fairly recently mainstream status among Western audiences. As a result, the possibilities and limits of the medium are still under exploration, with new technological developments constantly advancing ideas of what can be accomplished by video games every year. It is important to remember that film faced opposition as an artful form in its early stages, too (Adams 69), though none now deny the artistic accomplishments of the medium.

So, an outright denial of the artistic potential of video games is fairly shortsighted, but the fact that film has earned recognition for its artistic merit does not actually prove that the medium of video games is similarly endowed. To do that, we must examine the properties of film and literature and compare them to the properties of video games, and consider how these properties relate to common definitions of art. The core conceit behind literature and film as creative and artistic media lies in the notion of storytelling (though of course there are exceptions to this, particularly as pertains to film, which will be addressed later). It is through the nature of the story being told and how it is told that these artworks elicit critical thought,

self-reflection, and expanded perspectives. And just as the same rules of plot, setting, character development, and conflict apply to both literature and film, these same narrative rules apply to video games, as well. While examining the mechanics of narrative and gameplay as they operate in video games, Malte Elson et. al found that "[d]espite the interactivity of the storyline in games, its role and function are quite similar to those of narratives in movies or literature" (525) and that "[t]he features that make stories in games enjoyable are similar to those that comprise enjoyable narratives in other media" (528). In other words, storytelling requires the same basic components, no matter the medium, and as such, the same theoretical and critical approaches that work in the analysis of film and literature are effective in analyzing video games. A feminist critique of the damsel in distress trope works whether it is used to examine issues of female empowerment in traditional fairytales like *Sleeping Beauty*, the reversal of the trope in films like *Ella Enchanted*, or the challenging of gender norms in emotionally complex characters like Ellie in the game *The Last of Us*.

The fact that video games are bound by the same rules of narrative as literature and film is illustrated by how video games have imitated both of these media in structuring their storytelling. In the early days of video game technology, before the advent of voice acting or advanced visual graphics and animation, games relied on the conventions of literature - i.e. the written word – to tell their stories. Early story-oriented games utilized text-based systems to describe scenarios, and players typed simple commands to move around the map or interact with items to progress the story. The very first iterations of these types of games (e.g. *Adventureland*, published in 1978) were completely devoid of any graphical representations of these scenes and scenarios and relied entirely upon text, much like literature; the main

difference being that these texts were interactive. As graphical and animation technologies advanced, games gained the capacity to tell their stories visually as well as textually, and as a result, began to employ the conventions of film by combining written text (in the form of dialogue and narration) with animated representations of the story scenes. This led to the rise of 'cutscene' based storytelling in video games – that is, animated segments which the player watches and which progress the story. These cutscenes are broken up by gameplay segments, which are focused on the player's interaction with the game's mechanics and which typically do little to advance the plot, instead serving as interludes to progress towards the location of the next cutscene.

What cutscene-based methods of storytelling illustrate is how early writers struggled to adapt their storytelling techniques to the medium of video games. With no prior experience or precedent to follow, writers used the known narrative forms and practices of literature and film in these games, which leads to the rather significant disparity between the storytelling segments represented by cutscenes and the relatively story-less segments of gameplay. Basically, writers didn't know how to tell stories using gameplay, so they didn't. This is most exemplified by games like *Indigo Prophecy* and *Heavy Rain*, which are effectively playable movies: there is very little in the way of mechanical gameplay, with players mostly moving the characters around the map, examining items and talking to non-player-characters (NPCs) in order to trigger cutscenes to advance the story. The gameplay that is present in these games comes in the form of Quick Time Events (QTEs), which essentially boil down to interactive cutscenes where the player must input the correct controls that appear on screen through simple button presses in a bare-minimum level of gameplay. What this all means in terms of the



value of existing critical theories as applies to video games is that, because video game writers have been operating using the same storytelling conventions as film and literature, these critical theories can be applied pretty seamlessly and effectively to the analysis of video games.

It is important to consider, too, that like film, video games are an audiovisual medium. While many games, both in the past and today, employ a lot of written text in the act of storytelling, there are also many games that rely on visual and aural methods of storytelling. As discussed above, this can be seen in the cinematic format of cutscenes, which, because they mimic traditional film structures, can be critiqued using cinematic theories of analysis. Cinematography, musical scoring, and acting (both voice acting and body acting) are all valid areas for critique in video games just as much as in film, and the method and quality of execution in these areas are just as useful in analyzing the critical qualities of video games as they are in film. In addition, there are games that break from traditional storytelling structures and focus mostly or entirely on the visual and aural experience, just as there are films which experiment with audiovisual presentations and other kinds of art which primarily elicit "a non-linguistic expression of a feeling" (Adams 70). Many of these games have no story whatsoever, providing instead an audiovisual experience such as in the game *Flower*, which offers no narrative and even very little in the way of gameplay as players merely control gusts of wind to pick up flower petals and blow them across various landscapes. The point of the game lies not in the story or even in the gameplay, but in the affective experience that is had by playing.

What has so far been established is how video games operate under the same structures and rules of narrative as traditional forms of literature and film, and that video games employ the same audiovisual techniques as film in aspects such as cinematography,

musical scoring, and acting, such that even more experimental games that break from traditional notions of narrative can be effectively evaluated using the same critical methods that are applied to film and literature. The point of doing so has been to begin to prove that the video game medium at the very least has the potential for producing art, but more importantly, that these works can be evaluated according to the same criteria that film and literary works of art can be. However, all of this still has yet to provide any real proof that there exist any games which have reached for or even aspired towards the label of art. Whether there are games which may be objectively proven to have achieved the label of art is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is possible to show that there are games which do aspire towards artistry by examining current definitions of art and evaluating whether there are games which fit these definitions (or which at least attempt to).

Art is, of course, notoriously hard to define, and there are entire philosophies built around the attempt to objectively quantify what it is that makes something qualify as art versus a work of craft. Whether art is something intrinsic within the work itself or dependent on the viewer's reception of it is still debated within philosophical circles, but there are some basic attributes which can be identified in a common, modern understanding of what it means to be art. Perhaps foremost among these is the idea that art does more than entertain; it is more than mere decoration or empty fun. It is commonly understood that at a basic level, art is "about power of expression" (Folkerts 100); more specifically, it is primarily "an expression of the artist's thought" (Adams 68). Art need not be beautiful or appealing, but it most definitely should express *something*, make some kind of statement or "[refer] in some way to something outside itself" (Folkerts 103). The thing that makes art so powerful and important is the way in

which it encourages critical thought. Art invites the viewer to consider alternate perspectives (Folkerts 105) and "prompts us to detect differences between what we think we know and what we really see" (Folkerts 106). In essence, the thing that separates art from works of craft is that art asks its viewers to think: art challenges established modes of thinking, represents alternative perspectives, and encourages self-reflection, rather than just reasserting the status quo.

The question then is, are there any video games which express these attributes of critical thought and self-reflection? Are there games which at least attempt to provide alternative perspectives or challenge normative thought patterns? Do games refer back to reality and prompt critical reflection of the reality that is represented? To which the answer is a firm and definitive 'yes.' There are games which challenge gender norms by featuring gender non-specific characters (*Undertale*, *Final Fantasy IX*) or transgender characters (*Dragon Age: Inquisition*, *Street Fighter X Tekken*); there are games which challenge nationalist ideologies (*Bioshock: Infinite*); there are games which challenge players with complex ethical and moral problems (*Papers, Please*; *Spec Ops: The Line*); there are games which address the complexities of mental illness (*Life is Strange*, *Town of Light*). There are even games which actively work to replicate alternative or atypical life experiences, such as living with synesthesia (*Child of Eden*) or being blind (*Beyond Eyes*). As stated before, whether any of these games actually achieve the status of art is beyond the scope of this paper, but what can be proven is that there are games and game makers which at least attempt to provoke critical thought and to express artistic intentions.

What this means is that there is merit in critically examining video games in the ways in which film, literature, and other forms of art are examined – first of all because video games can be examined and evaluated using existing critical methods, secondly because video games as a medium are capable of artistry and thus worth considering critically, and thirdly because some video games have artistic merit in their intentions and are thus worthy of actual critical analysis. There is, however, another reason why video games are worth critical evaluation, and that is because video games are not simply a transference of the same structures of literature and film to another medium. As noted by Elson et. al, "meaningful experiences in digital games are not only elicited by narrative and audiovisual presentation, but ... interactivity adds a whole new layer of user experiences" (524) and "social interactions and relationships between the players and their avatars are particularly important" (528). In short, video games have unique experiential features that are not found in other media, and these features impact the player's experience of the narrative or artistic work in unique ways. So, although video games have relied upon the established narrative structures developed by literature and film for their storytelling, this is in large part a result of writers and game makers needing to adjust to and discover the capabilities of this new medium, rather than being indicative of any defining limitation of the medium itself.

For instance, though cutscene-based methods of storytelling are still commonly employed in video game writing even today, writers and game makers have begun to explore more deeply how storytelling can operate uniquely within the medium, breaking away from the known structures of literature and film. Some of these are not complete breaks from tradition, instead just tentative steps away from static cinematic cutscenes to a kind of playable cutscene

of a different order than the previously discussed QTEs. These sort of playable cutscenes allow the player to maintain control over the player-character while the events of what would normally be a static, unplayable cinematic sequence unfold. There are varying degrees of freedom allowed to the player during these sequences, from merely having the ability to move or look around while the scene plays out to having the option to interrupt or change the course of the scene by, for instance, cutting off an NPC's scripted dialogue (e.g. *Mass Effect*). Other games break more completely from the established methods of storytelling, finding ways to construct a narrative devoid of written or spoken narration or dialogue of any sort (e.g. *Journey*). These sort of breaks from the established narrative methods of literature and film are examples of writers and game makers beginning to explore the main feature which separates video games from other storytelling media: interactivity. The next section will focus on this and other unique storytelling features the video game medium offers.

## II. Video Game Storytelling Structures and Elements of Narrative

As established in the previous section, video games as a medium for storytelling operate under many of the same rules and employ many of the same conventions as other storytelling media. Using a combination of textual, visual, and aural narration, video games work within the same elements of plot, character, and conflict to tell their stories and develop their themes. However, video games have their own unique elements that separate them from other storytelling media and which have a significant impact on how their stories are shaped and told and how they are received by their audiences. It is important, then, from a critical standpoint, to understand what unique elements of narrative are employed by the video game medium and

how these elements change the experience of storytelling by contrast with more traditional methods.

The most obvious and most significant element of video games that separates them from other narrative forms lies in the interactivity that is at the core of the medium. Whatever the genre or style of the game, no matter how experimental or how much game-makers seek to challenge the assumptions and norms of the medium, a video game simply isn't a video game without some sort of ability to play it (Elson et. al 529). A video game is, after all, first and foremost, a game; thus, the element of interactivity – the gameplay – becomes an essential and foundational aspect of any work created within the medium. This means that any critical analysis and discussion of a video game must, at least in part, address the effects of this interactivity on the narrative, both in how it is presented to audiences and in how those audiences experience and receive that narrative. Just as cinematography is an essential element of film, with critical discussions often in some way addressing the visual style and camerawork, or the style and quality of the prose can be important to the discussion of literature in how sentence structure and language affect the presentation of themes, interactivity and gameplay are core elements of the narrative structure of video games, and its effects on the narrative must not be overlooked.

At the most basic level, even in video games with minimal gameplay, the interactivity that is inherent within the medium places audiences in a unique position as compared to film and literature. In these and other more traditional forms of storytelling, the audience is put in the role of observer: whether watching events unfold on screen or imagining them while reading along, in either instance the audience has no impact on the story being told. In these

sorts of media, the audience occupies a passive role, experiencing the story for the most part as the author intends – although interpretations are of course varied depending on individual experience and biases, the author maintains a far higher degree of control over the presentation of their story. This is not the case with video games, which, as a result of the interactivity that is at the heart of the medium, necessarily places the audience in the role of an active participant within the story. Most often, audiences are given control of no less than the story's main character. In doing so, the video game form naturally develops a strong connection between players and player-controlled characters as the player is prompted to identify with these characters. This process of identification is illustrated by Jon Robson's and Aaron Meskin's findings that "[g]amers typically make a variety of first-person claims concerning the games they are playing ('I defeated the dragon,' 'I was killed by the creeper,' and so on)," and their conclusion that, because of this, "engagement with video games is somewhat more akin to childhood games of make-believe than engagement with canonical fictions" (167). In the experience of the story, player identities become conflated with the characters whom they control, shifting the player's involvement within the narrative from one of passive audience member to that of an active participant as they take on the role of a character within the story itself.

While some video games embrace this aspect of the form more fully, allowing players to customize the player character's appearance or control their behaviors through branching storylines and dialogue trees, even relatively rigid narratives with predefined characters and narrative paths encourage audience association with those characters on a level beyond what is normally experienced in more established narrative forms. This phenomenon arises due to the

mere addition of player control – even in very linear story paths, players control character movement, actions in combat or puzzle-solving, story pacing (through the choice to pursue side-quests, taking time to explore, ‘grinding’ to level up or gather materials, etc.), and the myriad other minutia of gameplay. Michael Wellenreiter notes how, in the relatively rigid, linear narrative of the game *The Last of Us*, the game's author, Neil Druckman, "only [cedes] control to the player to perform combat or stealth scenes and solve puzzles" (345), otherwise maintaining a strict control over the narrative. However, Druckman gets away with it by setting up a compelling story and encouraging players to identify with the protagonist through an emotional experience of tragedy in the game's opening moments (Wellenriter 344). By granting even a small amount of control to audiences in this way, video games create a situation in which players feel a deeper connection to the character, becoming more invested in the characters and the outcome of the story because, in a way, they become that character when they play the game. This sort of conflation of player and character identity can be further illustrated by how, when given a predetermined character (i.e. one that the player does not customize, but whose appearance, personality, and backstory is fixed), often times players will feel compelled to make narrative choices in line with how that character would act based on the player's knowledge of the character's personality, values, and morals as presented through the story, rather than how the player them self would act in the same situation. As Folkerts notes, many players will go so far as to replay through game sequences "because they feel they 'have let their character down'" (112), indicating a level of identification with and loyalty to the personality and morals of the player-character.



Naturally, player identification with the player-character in a given game will be enhanced if players can customize the character's gender and appearance, allowing players to create an avatar, a digital representation of themselves within the game-space. Character customization is most prevalently seen in Role-Playing Games (RPGs), which typically offer large-scale worlds, richly inhabited with NPCs with whom the player can interact. Wellenreiter argues that, by allowing players to customize the player-character, they are given an opportunity to "insert a likeness of [themselves] into the game world," and "[t]his simple fact can create powerful identification effects for the player, which can run perhaps deeper even than the writer's craft" (347). The point here is that, the more control a player is given over the player-character, the stronger the identification between them is likely to become. And, while appearance customization offers players a way to own their characters within the game's story and greatly enhances the connection to the player-character, it is the ability in many games to control character behavior through narratively relevant actions and dialogue that often generates these connections most strongly.

Through the use of branching storylines and dialogue trees, providing multiple approaches to solving problems or completing tasks, video games give players an unprecedented level of control over the flow and progression of the narrative, which in turn enhances player connections to that narrative and its characters. In games like *Heavy Rain* and *Until Dawn*, the choices players make during gameplay have significant consequences on the narrative, to the point that those choices can even result in avoidable character death. Evaluating the choice-driven narrative of *Heavy Rain*, Daniel and Sidney Homan examine how the game "asks the gamer numerous questions. Will you pursue certain immoral actions to save

your son? Will you resort to violence or play by the rules?" (177). Noting that it is the answers to these questions which determine the narrative, they argue that "the human experience of living with repercussions is ... central to the art of engagement" that characterizes *Heavy Rain* (Homan and Homan 177). In such cases, where the player becomes responsible for the fate of the characters, the stakes are driven much higher for the audience than in other media where they have no control over what happens within the story. As a result, players feel the impact of the story much more heavily knowing that it is through their actions (or inaction) that events unfold: the knowledge that certain events, like a favorite character's death, could have been prevented can lead to more of an investment into those characters than in a movie or book where events will unfold the same regardless of what the audience thinks or does. It is this aspect of the video game medium – the gameplay – which makes them so unique, both from a narrative perspective and from the perspective of how the audience experiences or receives that narrative.

In many video games, the gameplay is an integral part of the narrative, not just a gimmick or device tacked on to an otherwise traditionally told story. Gameplay enhances the audience's connection to the story and its characters by placing the player within the story as an active participant and giving the player even a minimal level of control over one or more of its characters, all of which serves to enhance the level of immersion a player feels within the game and its story. In a review of the concept and theories of immersion, Niels Nilsson et. al define immersion at a basic level as "being or feeling surrounded by something" and note that one particular definition of immersion describes it as "a response to an unfolding narrative, the characters inhabiting the story world, or the depiction of the world itself" (110). According to

this definition, higher levels of immersion will correlate to an enhanced experience of the narrative, a notion that is borne out in common understanding – the more immersed an audience feels within the world of the story and its events, the more successful that narrative is perceived. For this reason, immersion is considered an important aspect of storytelling in all media: film and literature are praised or criticized based on the depth or lack of immersion, a common critique of both forms seen in whether the audience is 'pulled out' of the story at parts. Nilsson et. al note that narrative immersion is in many ways crucial to the sense of 'presence' within a fictional or virtual space, the greatest effect of which can only be accomplished if the audience takes on "the role of a character and [inhabits] the story" (125). Thus, because video games regularly place players within such a role, they can be seen to have greater immersive potential than perhaps any other narrative medium.

This immersive potential is enhanced even further through the incorporation of Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies. Due to the inherent nature of the video game medium, they are easily adapted to VR and AR, especially as these technologies have advanced both in quality and accessibility. The making of video games already involves the building of three-dimensional environments within which the player-character can move and explore, and many games are already designed using the first-person perspective, in which the camera, or the player's view of the game world, is at the player-character's eye-level. VR simply takes it a step further and puts players in the position of actually embodying the character, rather than viewing the world through a static screen. Similarly, AR blends the real world with the virtual world, overlaying digital elements onto reality through the mediation of devices like smart phones: the popular mobile app *Pokémon Go!*, for example, allows users to find the

titular creatures out in the physical world and view them on their smart phone screens. The app uses GPS technology to determine the location of different types of the creatures, requiring players to actually walk around real parks and neighborhoods to collect them, rather than moving a character through digital landscapes as in previous games in the series. This blending of the real and the virtual in AR, or the complete visual and audio immersion into the virtual space seen in VR, leads to even further enhancement of the already intensely immersive narrative experience offered by the video game medium.

The extreme immersive potential of video games is, however, challenged by the needs of gameplay. In most games, players are constantly reminded of the fact that they are playing a game due to the use of a Heads-Up Display (HUD) to present crucial elements on screen such as character health, area maps, enemy positions, available abilities and actions, button prompts, etc. Outside of cutscenes and some games designed around the absence of such components (e.g. *Journey*, *Inside*, *Outlast*), these HUD elements are constantly displayed on screen as aids to gameplay, but at the cost of narrative immersion. Additionally, players are kept aware of the act of playing a game due to the gameplay itself: holding a controller or using a keyboard and mouse to input the necessary controls to complete tasks, move the character, and engage in combat or puzzle solving all works to draw a player out of the immersion the narrative seeks to create. For some, this may speak to an inferiority in the medium's storytelling ability when compared to film and literature; however, though the challenges of gameplay are unique to video games, the battle against an awareness of a medium and its mechanics of storytelling breaking immersion is not. Holding a book or device, reading the text off a page or screen, and physically turning or swiping the pages are all similar reminders that one is reading a book and

can occasionally break one's immersion in the story. Similarly, the awareness of watching a film on a screen, whether large or small, can also break the immersion, and all of these media also battle against the physical environment in which the audience is placed: sitting in a chair or standing in a hallway, wearing headphones or not, and all the noises and other sensations of that environment will to a greater or lesser extent intrude upon the audience's immersion and experience of the story.

In addition to the concerns of the physical world breaking audience immersion, video games, like other storytelling media, can break immersion through their own use (or misuse) of narrative elements and devices. The use of a common and tiresome cliché, for example, will often bring audiences out of a story as soon as that cliché is recognized, regardless of the medium in which it appears. So, although video games have their own unique challenges when it comes to maintaining immersion in the form of gameplay, it can be seen that these challenges are not in practice so different from the other immersive challenges in sibling media like film and literature. And, just like in film and literature, these challenges can be and are overcome to a greater or lesser extent depending on the quality of the work's execution and the audience's familiarity with and acceptance (or rejection) of the conventions of the medium in which it is crafted. In any medium, there are conventions of narrative and craft that must be accepted if the story is to be comprehended, much less enjoyed. Written texts are structured around a narrative perspective, typically in a first or third person with varying degrees of omniscience or limitation. To a certain extent, depending on the genre and the particulars of the story being told, that narrative perspective must be accepted without too much digging for reason or logic behind it – if the reader refuses to accept a narrator's authenticity or credibility,

it will be very hard for that reader to get anywhere in most written stories. However, for most audiences, an acceptance of the general conventions of a medium is easily given and does not provide any barrier to the enjoyment of and immersion within the narrative experience.

To bring all of this discussion back to the topic of video game immersion and the issues of gameplay, the basic idea is that, much like a reader's general acceptance of the narrative perspective in a written text or a film-watcher's necessary acceptance of the 'invisibility' of the camera, a game player is able to accept the necessities of gameplay without much loss of immersion. For many players, a familiarity with a game's controls is built over time while playing such that the button inputs necessary for gameplay become second nature, unconscious acts that no longer intrude upon the narrative experience. This process is expedited by many games using similar controls and HUD layouts so that, as a player becomes familiar with one game, that familiarity can be transferred over to subsequent games played in a similar genre: it is an almost universal standard, for instance, that the left analog stick on a controller is used for movement while the right analog stick is used to control the camera, or the WASD keys correspond to forward, left, backward, and right movement, respectively, for keyboard and mouse. In addition, while the elements of gameplay may reduce narrative immersion, there are other kinds of immersion (Nilsson et. al 110) which are enhanced by gameplay mechanics, thus balancing out any losses in narrative immersion. In particular, Nilsson et. al describe a kind of immersion that is "a response to challenges demanding the use of one's intellect or sensorimotor skills" (110). This type of immersion results from the player being intensely focused and preoccupied with the demands of gameplay, whether it be strategic (observing, calculating, and planning) or tactical (continuous demand for reaction)

(Nillson et. al 115). For some games (e.g. *Tetris*, *Call of Duty*), the immersion is almost entirely generated in this manner, through the demands of gameplay, rather than through the narrative, which reinforces the idea that video games have a greater potential for immersion than other media.

The very nature of video games necessitates the inclusion of gameplay elements, and those gameplay elements have an interesting effect of simultaneously increasing and decreasing immersion. However, taking into account an audience's ability to accept and overlook the necessary conventions a medium employs in the act of storytelling (i.e. player acceptance of HUD elements and button inputs), and the fact that immersion is produced through other means than narrative, video games can be seen to have the potential for an overall more immersive experience than other narrative media. Rather than relying solely on the narrative, video games produce immersion in a variety of ways: through interactivity, the placement of the audience as a participant in the story, and the mental and sensorimotor challenges presented by gameplay. This uniquely immersive and interactive experience is further enhanced by the subject of the next section: the way in which video games break down the typical divide between a story's creator and the audience through the participatory nature of the medium and the level of narrative control granted to the player.

### III. Breaking the Boundary Between Creator and Audience

As has been discussed thus far, video games are a uniquely participatory medium, offering audiences a level of control that is not common or even possible in most other narrative forms. With the player placed in the position of an active participant within the

narrative, not only is immersion enhanced, as demonstrated in the previous section, but in many ways, the player becomes a collaborator in the story's authorship. Where film and literature offer a pre-conceived narrative that plays out for the audience the same way, every time, regardless of audience input, the very nature of the medium allows for narratives in video games to unfold differently in response to player actions. Even in games with relatively rigid, linear storylines, players have options while progressing through that story: they can rush through the necessary content to advance the main storyline as rapidly as possible, or take the time to explore, uncover secrets, and complete optional side-storylines (which themselves may be completed in a different order in subsequent playthroughs). Many games, however, embrace the participatory potential of the medium by presenting players with branching storylines, multiple endings, and a range of ways to complete objectives, all of which enhance a game's replayability (the incentive to play through an already completed game multiple times). It is often seen as the mark of a good film or book when audiences find enjoyment in re-experiencing a narrative they've already watched or read, and it is the same with video games; however, the video game medium can take this factor much further than what is possible in other narrative media by offering audiences a new version of that experience every time they return to it.

Because of the ways in which video games allow for audience participation in the construction and development of the narrative, players become akin to co-authors in that narrative. Wellenreiter argues that, by ceding control to players through character customization, dialogue trees, and narrative options which have real consequences on the outcomes of plot, "meaning is often created by or shared with the players, performing within



the screenwriters' created systems, rather than being dictated too closely or narrowly by the writers themselves" (349). As a result of this, game writers must acknowledge that players become co-authors within the narrative through their performance of the character, and they must account for this freedom of performance in the narrative. Often times, players can become so invested in the characters and the stories that they see themselves as having a hand in creating that game developers will receive heavy backlash if a game's narrative doesn't play out in line with player expectations. One popular game franchise faced this very phenomenon. In the original *Mass Effect* trilogy, developed by BioWare, players are given a lot of freedom and choice in the narrative and the actions of the player-character. Players can customize the main character, Commander Shepard's, appearance, gender, and elements of their backstory, but one of the main draws of the series is the level of choice players have when it comes to interacting with the game's NPCs. During conversations, players are given a range of dialogue options to respond to NPCs and can even interrupt the scripted game dialogue of those NPCs by jumping in with their own dialogue choices or, in some cases, with a physical action like slapping or punching. Similarly, there are many choices the player is faced with as the storyline progresses, some of those choices resulting in the death or destruction of one NPC or race versus another, with no good outcomes available. As a result of all these choices, players have a lot of freedom over the player-character's personality, encouraging players to engage in deep role-play or to self-identify very closely with the main character.

This level of player control and investment in the player-character ended up causing a clash between the game's authors and players. In the third and final installment of the *Mass Effect* trilogy, many players were disappointed by the very linear development of the narrative's

ending, despite the developer's promise that "the decisions you make completely shape your experience and outcome" (qtd. in Wellenreiter 354), to the point where fans of the series organized a campaign demanding the developers rewrite the end of the game (Wellenreiter 357). Players had been given so much freedom over the appearance, actions, and personality of the main character, as well as many significant narrative choices, that they felt betrayed by the way the game's ending made those choices inconsequential by taking the narrative to essentially the same place, regardless of what actions the player took. The game's developers, however, denied the players' sense of ownership of the narrative, refusing to alter the game's ending and citing a need to maintain the "artistic integrity of the game" (qtd. in Wellenreiter 357). Ultimately, the situation is revealing of an interesting phenomenon that arises in video game narratives: how, due to the participatory nature of the medium, the audience becomes a creative collaborator and co-author of the game's narrative.

This phenomenon of the audience as authorial collaborators becomes even more prevalent when examining multiplayer games – particularly Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) – where many players can interact within a gamespace, both with each other and with the gameworld. With multiplayer games, the narrative is not only generated through scripted events and the world as created by the game's developers, but also through players' unscripted interactions with one another in what Elson et. al call a "shared gaming experience" which "can offer meaningful experiences for the players with an established sense of community or shared memories" (535). In some multiplayer games, these player-generated narratives exist alongside the game's intended narrative, which progresses independently of and without regard to player interactions. This is typically how the narrative operates in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-

Playing Games (MMORPGs) like *World of Warcraft* and *Final Fantasy XIV*, where players are encouraged to form in-game groups to cooperatively tackle dungeons, boss battles, and other content that cannot be completed alone. However, these player groups and interactions typically have no impact on the storyline and are not reflected in the progression of the narrative; often, the narrative will even proceed as if the player character has completed these tasks and battles alone, despite the reality of doing so with the support of several other players. Even still, player interactions are a large part of the appeal of MMORPGs, and many players spend much more of their playtime interacting with other players and creating their own narratives than they do with the game's 'official' storyline. Wellenreiter cites how, in many RPGs, players never even complete the main plotline (350) and suggests that this fact reveals "that players may find the creation of their own emergent narrative content to be equally appealing" (351). Whether it is dedicated role-playing groups and servers acting out player-made storylines or just hanging out with friends in the online space the gameworld provides, MMORPGs offer players a way to develop a unique narrative in their interactions with other players and with the gameworld itself.

In this way, multiplayer games can be seen as a kind of a narrative medium in themselves due to the way players can develop a shared narrative through the medium of the game. While this process is in play in MMORPGs to an extent, it can be seen even more clearly in more open-ended, 'sandbox' games. These games give players more or less free reign within the gameworld, many often having little or no pre-existing narrative or gameplay goals. Instead, players are free to determine their own goals and to generate their own narratives. The best-known example of these kind of sandbox games is *Minecraft*, where players craft items and

tools and build whatever they choose using resources found in the game environment. One of the things that makes *Minecraft* so popular is the open-ended nature of it: the game gives no direction to players beyond basic controls, leaving players to set their own goals and determine their own gameplay tasks for themselves. While sandbox games are capable of being played solo, players often find the most enjoyment in them when interacting with other players to either work cooperatively or competitively to complete self-determined tasks. In either instance, these player interactions serve as the main source of narrative for these games – in a game like *Minecraft*, players might work together to complete large building projects like the creation of a city, or they might work against one another to sabotage each other's projects. Either way, it is through the interactions of the players, not through the direction of the game itself, that the narrative is created.

The narrative freedom found in the open-endedness of sandbox games like *Minecraft* leads to another way in which players can participate with the game as collaborative authors: through the creation of game modifications, known as 'mods.' Many players create mods to add their own ideas and content to a game, ranging from simple graphical fixes or updates to improve the game's visual quality to new storylines extending off of the official narrative to even the creation entirely new gameworlds using the same engine and assets as the modded game. These more extensive mods that add narrative content act much like fanfictions do in the world of film and literature: they are a way for audiences to interact with an existing narrative that they enjoy and to participate with the narrative as a collaborative author, using an established world and characters and adding their own, new storylines to it (or rewriting storylines that they were displeased with). However, unlike fanfictions, which are static

representations of one audience-member-turned-author's non-cannonical addition to a likewise static narrative work, the shared narratives developed in multiplayer video games are ephemeral, existing only in the moment; are reactive, with players and the gameworld responding in real-time to the actions of other players; and are directly interactive, allowing players to act with and upon the game environment and each other essentially unmediated.

The unmediated interactions between players that is made possible by sandbox games and fan-made mods also illustrate how games can create meaning and facilitate significant experiences for players outside of a structured narrative. One example of this is the game *DayZ*, which was originally created as a mod of the popular military simulator game *Arma III*. In *DayZ*, players must survive in a resource scarce, zombie-ridden world populated with other players. Like *Minecraft*, the game has no narrative script of its own, instead dropping players into the world with no introduction or guidelines and forcing them to create their own narrative through their actions within the gameworld and through interactions with the other players they come across. And while cooperation is a possibility within the game, the lack of resources and the hostile environment typically leads to competition between players as they try to survive. In a discussion of the unique narrative experience offered by *DayZ*, Lars Schmeink points out how, due to the structure of the game, "players will continuously find themselves confronted with moral dilemmas in which they have to choose to trust another human or act in self-interest" and that "these reactions will reflect not so much on the moral values assigned by the game (which are neutral) but rather the players' moral decisions based in their personal histories and gameplay experience" (80). As such, games can illuminate intriguing aspects of human morality and decision making, especially as mediated by various factors like the relative

anonymity of the internet balanced against the development of a recognized in-game community, where player actions lead to consequences of reputation and can impact future interactions. In this sense, games are unique among the creative media because their interactivity and mimicry of real-world systems (due to the real-time interactions of real-world people in a virtual space) can lead to remarkable discoveries about human nature (e.g. the accidental simulation of the spread of an epidemic in the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, which the CDC studied because it so accurately replicated real-world conditions).

To return, however, to the notion of storytelling, what we see in the interactive nature of video games is how the medium is, intentionally or not, defying traditional notions of authorship. The idea of a single, individual author for a creative narrative work has already been questioned by the film industry, with most movies being formed out of a collaborative effort between writers, directors, cinematographers, producers, and others; however, this challenge to the single-author mindset has mostly fallen flat with perceptions of film authorship centering around the director. Video games are created within a similarly collaborative environment as films, with writers, directors, producers, programmers, graphic artists, and more all working together to create the finished product of a game – but, unlike in the film industry, authorship has not resolved around a central figure in video games. Instead, most games are attributed to the studio which has produced them: names like Bioware, EA, Ubisoft, Capcom, and Square Enix are the ones mentioned when discussing a game's makers, not the directors or writers. In this way, games can be seen to already be perceived as more of a collaborative effort, with no one 'true' author. This notion, however, can go one step further to include the audience – the players – among those collaborative authors. There is already a

sense among players that they have some level of ownership over a game's narrative (Wellenreiter 353), as seen in the outcry that is stirred up when a game fails to deliver on its promises of narrative choice, like with *Mass Effect 3*. *Fallout 3*, another choice-driven, narrative heavy RPG, faced similar backlash to *Mass Effect 3* with its ending, which failed to give players a real choice and which had a glaring plot-hole for players who had recruited a certain NPC to their team late in the game. However, unlike *Mass Effect's* authors, the team behind *Fallout 3* acknowledged their mistake in limiting player choice in the game's ending. The writers realized that players had a legitimate voice in the game's narrative as a result of the level of choice they were given throughout the rest of the game, and they adjusted the ending in an attempt to maintain that level of choice.

What instances like these point to is a need for creators and those within the industry to recognize how audiences, through the interactive nature of the medium and the active role players take within the story, become co-authors of the game's storyline as they play through it. Especially taking into account the widespread use of mods and other player-made content, it is becoming clear that within the video game medium, more than in any other storytelling medium, the audience plays an integral role in the development and progression of the narrative. Failure to recognize this leads to backlash and resistance from the playerbase, as seen with *Mass Effect 3* and *Fallout 3*, and this reaction on the part of the player serves to further reinforce the idea of collaborative authorship between the creator and the audience. However, this also leads to complicated questions and issues of copyright: due to the widespread perception and acceptance of the notion of a single author for creative works,

copyright laws fail to take into account the way video games are challenging this notion and breaking away from that 'single-author' mold.

The question of who owns the digital content of a video game which allows for extensive customization by players, like in many MMOs, is one that courts and gaming companies are struggling to resolve. Sergio Dow et. al describe how, in MMOs like *World of Warcraft*, which has been running continuously since its original release in 2004, the game requires constant upkeep, refinement, and additions to content (6) — *World of Warcraft* has released six content expansions and announced a seventh, on top of regular system updates between expansions — speaking to the inherently collaborative nature of such projects even post-release. Players themselves also contribute creatively, whether it be in the form of feedback following a change or addition, the creation of fan content, or simply in their unique, individual performance of the game. However, as Dow et. al note,

Though the users participate actively within the game and create user-generated content, which would be attributed authorship and copyright in the real world, current laws disentitle the user within virtual worlds of all rights and thereby annul the basic concept of authorship and copyright legislation — to promote and protect creative individuals. (7)

The concern for players is largely one of recognition: as evidenced by the controversy over *Mass Effect 3* and *Fallout 3*, players merely wish to be recognized as collaborative authors and creative contributors to a shared virtual space and are not seeking to be monetarily or otherwise reimbursed for those contributions. Their ownership of the played experience,



whether offline or online, is what players want game developers to acknowledge and to account for in their games.

The video game medium isn't just challenging traditional notions of authorship and copyright, however, as another important aspect of games lies in the player community that forms around many games and game franchises. As noted earlier, it is the player interactions, both with the gameworld and with other players, that are what drives the narrative experience in many games. These interactions can (and do) extend outside the experiences that are mediated by the game itself, with player-made content regularly shared between players to enhance the gaming experience. Player-made content can be things like mods, as previously discussed, but also comes in many other forms, from wikis and strategy guides to forum posts, plugins, and third-party programs that add additional features or provide quality-of-life improvements to an existing game. This is seen frequently in MMOs and MMORPGs, but almost any game that is released, especially since the proliferation of the internet, is accompanied by compilations of information in fan-made wikis, subreddits, and message boards. Often, players spend as much time, if not more, interacting with a game's community outside of the game itself as they do while playing, and this community, spanning multiple media and platforms, is a large part of the overall gaming experience.

While other media sprout similar fan communities around particular works or franchises (e.g. *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter*), multiplayer video games are unique in that the inherent interactivity and connectivity between players allows fans to interact directly with both the work itself and with each other. Within the game world, players have control over the actions of their character, allowing them to take an active role in the experience. In interacting with

other players, multiplayer spaces allow for unpredictable, unscripted content, leading to a unique narrative and social experience every time a player participates. In other media, this sort of interactive participation with a work and with other fans of that work can only take place outside of the work itself in places like forums or conventions; with video games, it is within the work itself that this interaction and participation primarily takes place. Because of this, video games can be seen to encourage and facilitate creative collaboration perhaps more than any other medium, breaking down traditional boundaries between creator and audience and returning to a more community-based process of storytelling.

#### Conclusion:

In examining the collaborative, community-oriented nature of video games, what is perhaps most interesting, and most important, is how they are revealing the collaborative potential of human creativity. Somewhere along the way, modern, western societies lost touch with humanity's natural inclination to work communally, becoming infatuated instead with the notion of a single genius behind every discovery, invention, or work of creativity. This is perhaps best illustrated when thinking about the obsession to find the 'original' version of some folktale or legend and to attribute them to some 'original' author, when in reality these tales are communally generated, continually evolving alongside the communities that tell them in order to remain relevant to that community's lived experience. Video games are in many ways reminding us of a forgotten truth of human creativity and innovation: people do not create in a vacuum, but build upon previous creations and discoveries, adding to, expanding upon, and improving the work of others. In this sense, all creativity, all invention, can be said to be

collaborative. Even beyond the sphere of video games, narrative, and entertainment, this idea of humanity's collaborative nature is important to remember: in recognizing the potential and the benefits of collaborative work, rather than getting bogged down in concerns of originality and ownership, human innovation can be stimulated by the sharing of information and discoveries.

Collaboration needn't necessitate revoking all rights of ownership, however; it is more a recognition of the contributions of others and, importantly for creative works, a realization of the community that often arises around that work. It is telling of our natural inclination towards collaboration in how instinctively players feel an attachment to and ownership of the avatars they create in a game, especially as the customization and freedom of choice within a game increases. Players are recognizing their own contributions to a shared creative work, the product of many minds and talents working collaboratively to create a framework within and against which the player performs in the act of playing the game. While some may argue that, in the creation of video game narratives, the key to a game's narrative variability lies in the skeletal architecture of that narrative, which is built by a game's authors, thus minimizing or even negating the contributions of the player as co-author – if all of a game's narrative outcomes must necessarily be written and coded into the game beforehand, then the writers and programmers are solely responsible for the narrative, regardless of player input. However, even ignoring those games whose narrative is developed by player interactions and not by the game itself, like *DayZ* and *Minecraft*, players can be seen to co-author a game in the fact that their input is integral to the performance of a particular playthrough or completion of a particular instance of that narrative. Video games are the jazz performances of the narrative

world, innately encouraging and requiring an active, participatory audience for the work to be realized. For video games, the essence of the narrative and the experience of the work lies in each individual, improvised performance (playthrough) of that work, not in the existing architecture within which the performance is produced. A book exists as a complete object whether it is read or not; a film plays whether there is an audience to watch it or not; but a game cannot progress without a player to play it.

This thesis set out to explore the features and critical merits of the video game medium, initially as objects of art, but more importantly, as objects of critical analysis. In doing so, it has been my hope to illuminate how video games are not only worthy of the same kind of critical analysis that is afforded to film, literature, and other creative storytelling media, but that they are necessary to serious critical thought. Because video games have unique elements of narrative and impart unique experiences upon audiences, the medium is ripe for critical analysis, with much to offer that cannot be found or studied in any other medium. The highly interactive, participatory, and immersive nature of video games provides a wealth of subject matter to explore: whether it be in the realm of narrative critique (the emphasis of this thesis) or psychological and sociological study, video games can contribute meaningfully to existing theories and discussions while also providing material to open up new discussions and perhaps lead to new theoretical discoveries regarding human nature, morality, and social and psychological experience.

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