About Authoring: *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* as a Semiotic, Narrative, and Rhetorical Text

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Introduction

The game was obviously approaching its end. As I had done throughout playing, I guided the younger brother along a curving path by using the right control stick. I approached a vertical obstacle. There were two steps to mount the rock. (Of course there were.) The youngest brother came to the little bridge where gameplay began. He shouldn't be able to cross; this was the smaller, and weaker of the two brothers. Pulling the right trigger confirmed my expectations. However, in the simple control scheme, only one option remained. I tried the left trigger, and the controller began to shake. The younger brother was channeling the strength of his former companion, his older brother. I guided him, then across the bridge, and over another obstacle that he should not have been able to surmount alone. Again, by pulling the left trigger, I conjured the support of the older brother. The younger brother ran the final length to bring his father the water from the Tree of Life. The story was nearly complete, and my share in it presumably was.

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The above passage describes the conclusion of my experience playing *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*, a video game released in 2013 (Starbreeze Studios). A lot is at play there: my thoughts range from deep investment in the story to parenthetical appreciations of the game's level design; I guide the characters and perform the actions that drive narrative events, but I recognize the story as theirs rather than mine; and an unconventional, rhetorical control scheme governs my emotional response to the narrative's conclusion. Video games are often so complicated; after all, what are video games? Aarseth reminds us that they are "not simply

games, but complex software programs that can emulate any medium, including film, text/novel, graphic novel, and, for that matter, simulate board games and sports" (2012: 130). The newness and uniqueness of the video game medium is a frequent topic in discussing the form, but much that can help us understand video games has already been done—and not where many would think. The broad field of English studies provides us the theoretical frameworks for understanding how video games operate both similarly to and differently from other artistic media.

In an effort to define English's role as a rightful collection of critical lenses which might help to understand what video games can do, I would like to provide a suitable definition for English studies. That is no small task. English studies in the twenty-first century are undeniably broad. Culler describes that breadth: "For instance, an English major might include literary and rhetorical analysis, historical analysis, social analysis, cultural analysis, cognitive and moral analysis, and the practice of writing" (92). Janis Haswell and Richard Haswell argue for English's unifying characteristic: "Authoring, the human inner act of making texts, is the one term that most unites the four divisions of English studies—composition, literature, linguistics, and creative writing" (1). Haswell & Haswell identify authoring as the "inward act that triggers the outward act of writing" (2). They consider authoring in conjunction with two companion terms: potentiality and singularity. These terms culminate in an understanding of authoring as an internal process defined both by possibility and by uniqueness of experience and perspective. I choose to work around authoring as a uniting term for English studies not because I think it is the only acceptable understanding of our broad discipline; I choose authoring as a central term because of its potential offerings to English's intersection with the video game medium. I will ultimately argue that both video game developers and players participate in forms of authoring in

their participation with the medium, and so Haswell & Haswell's notion of authoring as a central term strikes me as a potential bridge that can unite English studies with video game studies.

Instead of working with Haswell & Haswell's division of English into literature, composition, linguistics, and creative writing, however, I look to the theoretical frameworks offered by three English subfields: *semiotics/textuality studies, narrative theory,* and *rhetoric.* To begin this English studies-inspired examination of the video game medium, I first move to establish video games as semiotic, or meaning-making texts. Like other, more traditional texts (novels, films, etc.), video games bring a collection of meaningful content from a designer to a consumer—and as such, can be "read" and composed similarly to those texts. My next move is to analyze video games as a storytelling medium. By crossing contemporary scholarship in narrative theory with research the privileges video game stories, I suggest an understanding of video games as a narrative medium that imparts varying degrees of authorship to the player. Finally, I consider video games as rhetorical entities, exploring the persuasive power of processes, the agency of play, and the ways that physical apparatuses are used to structure play experiences. I conclude each section of my broad, English studies-informed exploration of the video game medium with close analyses of *Brothers*. The result of this research into English's potential offerings to video game studies and analysis of a critically important example from the medium culminates in an argument that the relationship might be mutually beneficially, that video games might have something to give back to English studies: a new library of texts (that may seem unexpectedly comprehensible) and a vigor that could revive a discipline that is so frequently addressed as in decline.

Semiotics: Games as Meaningful Texts

Before we can begin to "read" video games, we must establish both that they are texts and what kind of texts they are. So, what is a text? The definition is broadening rapidly. The most restrictive, traditional understanding of text includes only verbal communication, particularly the written or printed word. However, studies in media literacy have pushed the boundaries: "Perhaps the most important extension on meaning which the term 'text' has acquired in recent theory is the inclusion of visual elements" (Graddol and Boyd-Barrett 45). While this media literacy perspective on texts is quite more inclusive than earlier definitions— inviting advertisements, packaging, and various nonverbal artifacts—it has its boundaries that define texts as material and intentional: "A text has a concrete existence of some kind" (41), and, "Texts have structure. They are not random collections of messages but orderly constructions" (45).

Definitions of text have become even more inclusive, however. Whereas Graddol and Boyd-Barrett held that texts should be material and intentional, Jewitt sees even fleeting actions as textual: "Textual formations may also have a more ephemeral relationship to time and space" (276). This acceptance of the ephemeral elements includes, for example, "the movement of teacher and students, their talk, look, gesture." Jewitt's perspective on texts is concentrated on "modes and systems of making meaning other than speech and writing, including the resources of music/sound, action, visual communication and their arrangement as multimodal ensembles" (275). Graddol and Boyd-Barrett remind us that the Latin roots of our contemporary English word "text" refer to something woven. Jewitt's understanding of the various semiotic modes is an understanding of the various fibers available to composers weaving multimodal texts.

Jewitt alludes to one thread that is special to the video game medium in her list of non-verbal semiotic modes: action. When Jewitt discusses action, she is referencing Martinec, whose work on action is primarily concerned with meaningful gestures in interpersonal communication—work that may still be helpful to understanding certain video game actions/interactions. The action that concerns me in video games, however, is interaction between players and video game systems. When we think about the semiotic modes available to video games, we think often about their overlap with film. Both video games and film utilize aural and visual modes. Sounds can include specially recorded soundtracks, sound effects, and voiced language. Visuals build story worlds through the use of moving pictures, static images, and on-screen writing. What separates video games from films as a communicative medium, then, is the control offered to players. In controlling the movement of the camera and characters, video game players are engaging with a different semiotic mode. The notion is not new. In 1997, Aarseth identified earlier, text-based video games as a form of what he called ergodic literature: "In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1). Aarseth hints that the player's efforted interaction with video game systems constitutes a distinct semiotic mode.

All of the content of video games' familiar semiotic channels (sound and imagery) is accessed by way of player interaction with the video game. Miguel Sicart identifies the means by which players interact with video games as "game mechanics." His definition states, "Game mechanics are methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state." Sicart builds on the work of Järvinen (2008) "to formalize [mechanics] as verbs, with other syntactical/structural elements, such as rules, having influence on how those verbs act in the game." More simply, mechanics can best be understood as the set of sanctioned actions that

provide agents (human and artificial alike) the means to interact with the game state. To ground the idea, Sicart provides a non-exhaustive list of game mechanics from the popular first-person shooter, Gears of War: "cover, shoot, reload, throw (grenade), look (at a point of interest), use, give orders, switch weapons. All of these are methods for agency within the game world, actions the player can take within the space of possibility created by the rules." In simplest terms, a game's mechanics are the meaningful methods for agency that the game offers the player.

The status of these interactive entities as texts has precedent, even in public discourse, as evidenced by blog posts like "Games Are Texts" (Emtilt). However, that designation is not unanimous; some, like Wheeldon, contest the labeling of video games as texts. He argues that video games do not fit an understanding of author-focused "works" or interpreter-focused "texts": "Video games explode that framework by including the audience in the progression of the story" (Wheeldon). For some, the necessity of interaction means a complicating or dissolving of our traditional frameworks for analyzing texts. In crossing these two perspectives, I find a conflict in how to analyze the interactivity of a medium that is distinguished for its interactivity.

Gilman offers an insightful method for considering the seemingly irresolvably subjective medium:

> I see a clear similarity here between computer and genetic code in video games, as it exists in the unexpressed list of code, as a genotype, and the expressed phenotype. … The player, then, engages the game by playing it, collapsing that potential into a single, linear playthrough, via actions taken, understood as both inputs through the hardware or the actions of the player avatar in the game. …

This playthrough is what is left from that collapse, forming the text of the game.
(2)

Gilman identifies the ingredients of a gaming experience: an unexpressed list of code and the expression of certain elements of that code as determined by the player's actions. In Gilman's genotype and phenotype division, we hear echoes of Haswell & Haswell's central English concept, authoring. They broke down authoring into two, essential categories: potentiality and singularity (2). The potential in any video game experience is confined to the software's code or genotype. Without meddling beneath the surface in the game's code, that code offers an immense, but finite amount of elements that can be experienced in various combinations. The singularity of a video game experience is what happens when a player interacts with the genotype to create a subjective playthrough or phenotype. Gilman's division demonstrates an awareness of the objectively present elements of a video game text and the subjective experience of navigating them, an awareness of potentiality and singularity, both integral to the Haswell & Haswell's definition of English's chief concern: authoring.

But why bother with video games, even if they are texts? What does it mean to "read" those texts? What does it mean to be literate with regards to video games? What transferable skills are involved? Fortunately, there is a healthy canon of research on the values of video game literacy. Gee (2003) presents an early, foundational argument for the study of the then-(and somewhat still)-maligned medium: "What [players] are doing when they are playing good video games is often good learning" (199). He reiterates his opinion that video games demonstrate good teaching and learning principles: "They operate with—that is, they build into their designs and encourage—good principles of learning" (205). Even while admitting that we "have no idea

yet how people 'read' video games," Gee moves towards a contemporary understanding in his reference to *design* (204). Other scholars have followed his direction.

Zimmerman puts forward a concept of *gaming literacy*, a term he likes for the double meaning of "game." Zimmerman's concept "'games' literacy, bending and breaking rules, playing with our notions of what literacy has been and can be" (25). Zimmerman breaks gaming literacy into three concepts: systems, play, and design. Defining a system broadly as "a set of parts that interrelates to form a whole," Zimmerman identifies systems literacy as an awareness of how intricate systems work, an awareness of complexity in general. Both in considering our systemic world and in considering the multimodal, complex video game medium, that awareness of complexity is valuable. Zimmerman sees video games as "essentially systemic" in that every game "has a mathematical substratum, a set of rules that lies under its surface" (26). Play complements systems literacy. Zimmerman says, "Being literate in play means being playful—having a ludic attitude that sees the world's structures as opportunities for playful engagement" (27). A literacy based on play is a literacy that understands the role of the interactor that plays with systems. To move from systems to play is to "shift focus from the game to the players, from structures of rules to structures of human interaction" (27).

Like Gee, Zimmerman culminates with design. Design is integral for Zimmerman in that it brings gaming literacy closer to the domain of traditional literacy. Design brings "the traditional idea of literacy as understanding and creating meaning back into the mix" (28). Emphasizing the work of game designers, Zimmerman presents design as the mediator "between structure and play; a game system is designed just so that play will occur" (29). Design, in part, is about understanding how systems are created with meanings in mind, and how those and other meanings are discerned from play within those systems. Beavis also identifies video game

literacy as a multifaceted literacy that emphasizes an understanding of design: "'Reading' or playing video games requires the player to interpret all sorts of different symbol systems— words, pictures, sounds, symbols, color, and so on—simultaneously as well as alone and in combination" (435). Here, Beavis covers similar ground to Zimmerman in his notion of complex systems literacy. Both recognize in video games a demand for multiple literacies, specifically design literacy. For Beavis, design's noun and verb forms hint at design literacy's value as a tool for comprehension and composition:

> "Design, with its double resonance as both noun (the design of the game) and verb (to design a new character), provides a way to think about the mix of literacies that creates most forms of text with which students interact in various ways (what students "read") and about the productive component of work in English and other areas, where creating is an important part of coming to understand and [make] things one's own." (435)

For these literacy scholars, a literacy of design is an important tool for young people entering into and interpreting a complex world. Video games, in that they present complex, designed worlds of their own, are good texts for imparting that literacy. Beavis says it best: "[A]s we reimagine English and language arts curricula to engage with the texts and literacies of our times, games occupy an important place as challenging but important hybrid textual forms that are inextricably linked with action" (439).

Introducing *Brothers* as Text

I bring this understanding of video games (as semiotic texts) and design literacy (as an overarching model for comprehending and composing complex texts) to *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons.* While authorship in video games can be a complicated, shared role, as I discuss in the next

section, the *auteur* of my primary subject of analysis, *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*, is clearly

Josef Fares. Fares is a film director, and he assumed a similar role in working on *Brothers*: his

vision drove the project, but he worked with a large team (Starbreeze Studios) to design the final

product. Fares' vision could not be compromised: "Nobody's interfering with us, not our

publisher, nothing, nobody. This is a totally passion project" (Fares, Davies). The passion runs

deep for Fares, who used the video game to translate particular experiences from his youth,

including the experience of burying a sibling (Mahardy).

So, how do Fares and Starbreeze present those experiences? Davies describes *Brothers*:

"You control each brother simultaneously using the thumbsticks of a control pad, and each reacts

to the world in a different way, with the game asking you to navigate its obstacles through a

peculiar and innovative form of asymmetrical self-cooperation. But it's more than a puzzler;

every interaction describes the touching co-dependence of the siblings and their individual

personalities with surprising power and elegance." Indeed, *Brothers* places itself in an unusual

video game genre, the single-player cooperative game. In the game, players control an older

brother (left analog stick to move, left trigger to interact) and a younger brother (right stick to

move, right trigger to interact) simultaneously. This unique control scheme (pictured below) is

used to pilot the brothers across a scenic, puzzle-filled fantasy landscape to acquire water from

the Tree of Life for their ailing father. Over the course of the video game's story, the initially

estranged brothers become much closer as they conduct their journey. By the end of the game,

the older brother is wounded and dies, leaving the younger brother to complete the trip home and

save their father. *Brothers* is arguably uncomplicated by the video game medium's standards. Its

story is simple, its control scheme is minimalist, and a playthrough lasts only a few hours. I look

to *Brothers* specifically *because* it is designed simply and elegantly to communicate the experience of the two brothers.
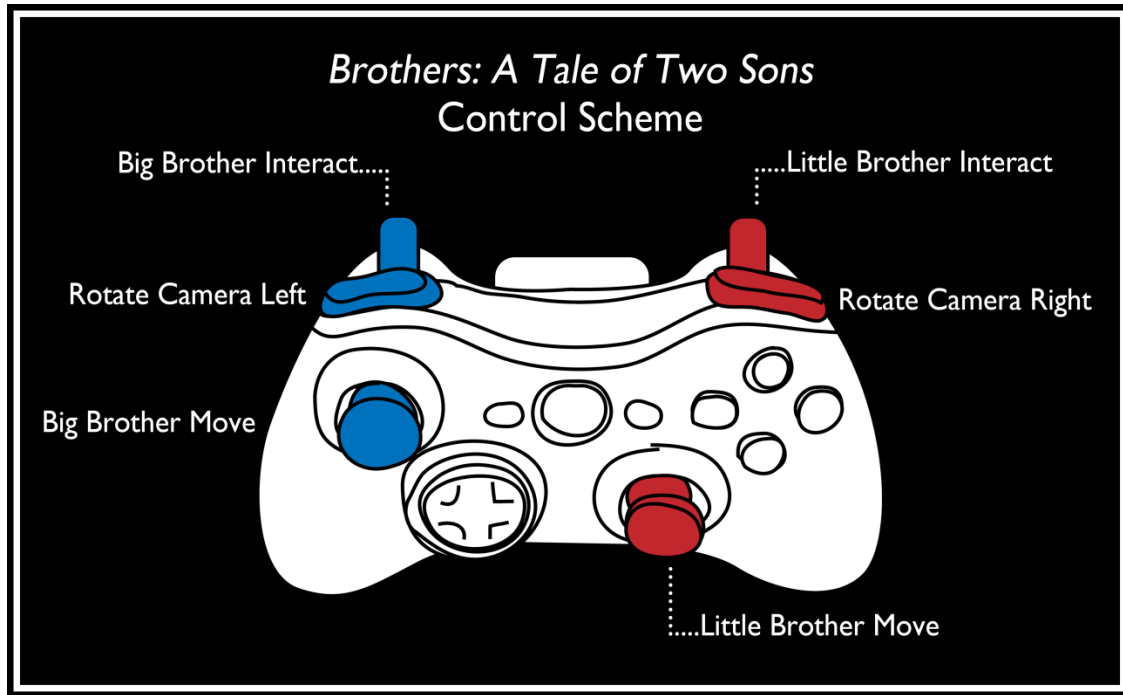
In *Brothers*, I again see echoes of Haswell & Haswell's elements of authoring: potentiality and singularity. First, potentiality. I have spent some time alluding to the various potentials available to the video game medium, one that can replicate so many other forms. There are many, many ways to design a video game. *Brothers'* virtue is in its singularity, in what it chooses not to do and not to use, foregrounding the things that are important. *Brothers* is, loosely, a non-verbal video game. There is no on-screen text to be found aside from the title-screen and the game's options menus. The only dialogue between characters is in a fictional, babbled language with uncertain rules; characters' intentions can be understood by their gestures, but their words are mostly gibberish. (There are some exceptions. One of the few examples is that the brothers refer to each other as "Naiee" and "Naia.") *Brothers* backgrounds verbal communication and invests much of its meaning into the aforementioned semiotic channel of

interaction. The intention of foregrounding interactivity comes from Fares, who says, "The idea of controlling two characters hasn't been done before quite like it is in this game. No one's taken it this far. So this unique simultaneous mechanic feels new to play. But the most important part is that the player should feel an emotional connection: Big Brother on the left hand and Little Brother on the right hand. So that's the more important issue" (Fares, Davis). By collapsing the *potential* resources of the video game medium down to a *singular*, refined play experience—one focused on interactivity, unique to the medium—*Brothers* shows us authoring in action.

The video game was released in 2013 to excellent critical reception. The Xbox iteration of *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* has an aggregate 86/100 score from Metacritic and won the award for "Best Xbox Game" at the 2013 VGX Awards. The game also won the award for "Game Innovation" from the British Academy Video Game Awards. By choosing to analyze an example of the video game medium that is so successful and innovative, I hope to provide proof that an English studies perspective on video games is fruitful to the best the medium has to offer and will continue to be fruitful as video games develop. Indeed, I find that an English studies background has much to offer a reading of *Brothers*, a smartly designed narrative and rhetorical text. If English has frameworks to offer *Brothers* and video games like it, I expect that they have something to give back to English.

Narrative: The Storytelling Affordances of Video Games

An important question in the study of the communicative properties of video games is thus: what are the narrative affordances of games? The answer is a bit complicated. Asking that question means targeting the particular medium and making assumptions about its representational range. So, from a storytelling perspective, what is this video game medium that I am investigating? "Video games" are much more than games; they are often amalgams that replicate the properties of various other media, as Aarseth reminds us (2012: 130). Probing to find the narrative affordances of such a medium makes the assumption that video games are capable of demonstrating qualities that might be described as *narrative*, a representational text-type distinguished by Herman from *description* and *explanation* (12-13). Aarseth, in his suggestion that video games can emulate all other media, respects that capability.

Our investigation is a question of media, and "not all story telling media are created equal. Some afford multiple communicative channels that can be exploited by a given narrative to evoke a storyworld" (Herman xii). Herman calls on research by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) and Jewitt (2006) that distinguishes modes from media: "In their work, modes are semiotic channels (better, environments) that can be viewed as resources for the *design* of a representation… By contrast, *media* can be viewed as means for the dissemination or production of what has been designed in a given mode" (xiii). As I have discussed, modes are the "communicative channels" by which meaning is made in various media. Media are simply the material tools for the production and dissemination of semiotic creations. Herman considers both monomodal texts[1] (e.g. short stories like Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants") and multimodal texts (e.g. graphic novels like Clowes' *Ghost World* and Zwigoff's film adaptation) in his narrative theory. Herman identifies dual semiotic channels in both graphic novels and film.

In his concept, graphic novels communicate meaning along a "verbal and visual information track." Films, by contrast, communicate via "the filmed-image track and the audiorecorded sound-track."

In the introduction of his narrative theory, Herman admits to focusing "special attention here on face-to-face storytelling, print texts, graphic narratives that involve word-image combinations, and, to a lesser extent, film" (ix). Correspondingly, he does not investigate the semiotic channels available to his narrative category of "computer-mediated environments such as e-mail, blogs, hypertext narratives, and interactive fiction" (ix). Understanding the semiotic channels inherent to video games (most likely to be organized under Herman's narrative media category of interactive fiction) offers a key to understanding the narrative affordances of the medium. As I establish in the section on semiotics, video games, like films, communicate along visual and aural channels. The communications can be similar, but are often structurally different. Rather than present visual and aural content to narrative consumers along a predetermined temporal track, video game visuals take the shape of visually-rendered, physical worlds occupying two or three dimensions; the variation in visual content is driven by the player's manipulation of the freely-controlled camera and/or by player progression across space. Likewise, pre-recorded audio may be distributed across a game's topological space, e.g. the sound of a loud shriek that is coded to play only once a player enters a certain area, a cemetery for example. The distinction between video games' distributions of visual and aural content and films' distribution of visual and aural content is made by way of player agency, the interaction described by Sicart as "mechanical interaction."

This third semiotic channel, the channel of mechanical interaction, is one by which a video game's designers imbue the player with degrees of *narrative authorship*. The notion of the

game player as co-author has been approached skeptically by Aarseth. Speaking on the genre of adventure games, he wrote: "[I]t could be argued that the reader *is* (or at least produces) the story" (1997: 112). While the potential disruption of traditional speaker/hearer dichotomy is intriguing, this authorial revolution is only possible insofar as text creators enable it. Authorship, if acquired by game players at all, is subordinate to and dependent on the authority of a game's designers. A parallel situation can be found in hypertext fiction: "A user of a hypertext novel, for instance, who annotates and relinks his or her copy of the hypertext structure, is not on the same level of discourse as the novel's creator" (167). Sicart's definition of game mechanics supports the understanding that a game player's authorship is subordinate to that of the designer(s): "For designers and theorists, game mechanics are discrete units that can be created, analyzed and put in relation to others. But for any agent in a game, the mechanics is everything that affords agency in the game world. Mechanics is thus tied to agency in the game system." In simplest terms, for designers, mechanics are creatable and manipulable units that offer players agency in a game world; for players, those mechanics create the limited set of tools for interaction. Mechanics and the greater or lesser amounts of agency afforded by them are handed down from designer to player. (Note: this understanding of authorial subordination applies only to situations where players accept the authority of designers over their games; in more rebellious situations, players may assume the power of the designer—the power to create and manipulate the mechanics and the rules that govern them in the video game—by accessing and manipulating the complex, coded structures underlying the video game as designers intend it to be accessed.)

Let us specify this suggested player role, that of shared authorship, by crossing Herman's recent narrative theory with Aarseth's—one that emphasizes the video game medium. Again, so much has been said of video games' distinction from other narrative media; it seems possible

that a narrative theory that does not privilege games may be inapplicable to them. I think, however, that Herman's work holds up well in video game analysis. His ideas, when met with Aarseth's, support the notion of players' authorship. Herman suggests that "[a] prototypical narrative can be characterized" by exhibiting four elements, which he abbreviates to "(i) situatedness, (ii) event sequencing, (iii) worldmaking/world disruption, and (iv) what it's like" (xvi). "Situatedness" suggests that narratives are embedded in certain discourse contexts, which they cannot be considered separately from. "Event sequencing" summarizes the necessity that narratives represent particularized events over a temporal span. "Worldmaking/world disruption" summarizes the nature of narratives as blueprints for the construction of storyworlds, and the necessity that the events of a narrative should throw such a storyworld into flux. Finally, "what it's like" suggests that all narratives represent what it is like to experience storyworlds-in-flux; the quality of what it's like tends to be coded through human or humanlike experiencers of events. Herman's model purports to speak to all categories of narrative media, from the codex to computer-mediated environments.

Contrary to Herman's broad model, Aarseth (2012) offers a narrative theory *of games*. Aarseth's work suggests that games and narratives (here, two distinct categories) "seem to share a number of elements, namely a world, its agents, objects and events" (2012: 130). Aarseth identifies these shared elements as "the cognitive building blocks of human reality, as well as of mediated representations of the same." Regardless of their status as the basic units of human reality, Aarseth's elements align significantly with Herman's. Aarseth's Worlds element corresponds to Herman's worldmaking element, Events to event sequencing, and Characters to "what it's like," which necessitates human/humanlike experience. Aarseth's inclusion of "Objects" as a shared narrative/game element is the only point of departure between the two

models. As it turns out, the broader multimedia model and the video game-specific model largely agree. My assumption that video games can be narrative seems to be supported by the agreement between Herman and Aarseth.

Aarseth's approach to understanding the shared ludo-narrative (ludo referring to the Latin ludus, or "play") elements is to orient them as continua ranging from "pure story" to "pure game" (132). For example, the Worlds continuum includes topological structures more or less open to player exploration: more open signals closeness to the pure game pole; less open signals closeness to the pure story pole. Aarseth suggests that the Worlds and Objects categories are measures of player agency. In other terms, the extent to which players have control over the paths they take and the objects they interact with measures "player agency." He contrasts this with "author agency," which includes the Characters and Events categories as measures. Aarseth only recognizes the latter two categories, Characters and Events, as narrative in nature.

Contrary to his own division, I seek to reunite the two parts of Aarseth's narrative theory. In considering his four continua, I suggest to replace the old poles ("pure story"/"author agency" and "pure game"/"player agency") with new ones, "designer authorship" and "player authorship." Each of Aarseth's continua (Worlds, Objects, Characters, Events) describes a narrative element and allows for either more designer authorship or player authorship over it. In Worlds, the range would run from the prescribed, unicursal paths of many linear narratives to the open-world landscapes that allow players to determine their paths. With Objects, the range runs from objects of low flexibility (e.g. fixed buttons) to great flexibility (e.g. building tools in Minecraft), including the ability to craft items. Characters range from fully fleshed-out characters with detailed backgrounds to blank-slate, nameless and voiceless protagonists bestowed to the player in role-playing games. Video game events range from fully predetermined "main stories"

to no necessary participation in "main stories" to enjoy the experience of play. Aarseth's understanding of these continua as spanning between poles of "pure game" and "pure story" is helpful, but rethinking the poles as "designer authorship" and "player authorship" helps us understand what the gradient really shows: more or less prescribed player authority over narrative elements. With this rethinking, closeness to the "player authorship" end of the continua indicates greater player agency over the construction of the narrative, rather than participating in something closer to play and further from narrative.

Placement along these continua of agency are expressed through a game's mechanics as they pertain to those narrative elements. In the case of Worlds, the mechanics would be movement and camera/perspective control, which are constricted by the rules of level design/topology. In the case of Objects, mechanics may include the utilization of static objects (e.g. fixed buttons), portable objects (e.g. weapons), or even the creation of new objects from other objects (e.g. survival game "recipes" for complicated equipment or furniture). In the case of Characters, the mechanics might be as reserved as choosing a predetermined protagonist's name (i.e. *Pokémon Blue/Red*) or as liberated as a Create-a-Character mode in role-playing games (i.e. the *Fallout* series). In the case of Events, the mechanics may dictate that main story events can be altered by player choices—either directly or as influenced by in-game "karma" systems that evaluate player behavior along a moral scale—or that players have no influence over the narrative's events. As is the nature of continua, interesting middle territories exist between the poles. Each domain outlined by Aarseth may offer more or less agency to the player according to the game mechanics (and governing rules) made available to them. In considering Aarseth's work, it seems true that player interaction with video game mechanics is the process by

which players invoke their share of greater or lesser authorship over well-accepted narrative elements.

Understanding Narrative in *Brothers*

By analyzing *Brothers* with Herman's broad multimedia narrative theory, we can recognize its familiarity. It shares all the basic elements of narrative that any narrative should. By performing that analysis in concert with an analysis of how players participate in authorship over *Brothers'* narrative, we come to understand the ways in which it is designed to tell a particular, partially manipulable story primarily through player interaction. In these analyses, we introduce a new lens for understanding the narrative accomplishments of one of the most critically well-received video games in recent years (Metacritic). As a reminder, *Brothers* is a single-player cooperative video game with a simple story: two brothers (pictured on right) with an implicitly strained relationship work together to traverse their fantasy landscape in search for a miracle cure for their ailing father. The game is noteworthy for its sacrifice of verbal communication, instead placing the weight of communicating its story onto what I suggest may constitute video games' third semiotic channel, interactivity.

To reach an understanding of *Brothers'* narrative through Herman's model is to reach an understanding of its basic elements. Situatedness comes first. One of the discourse contexts that comprise Herman's first element (situatedness) of narrative is face-to-face conversation. Herman calls on the research of Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, who identify in conversation settings an

"economy of turn-taking." Turns in discourse are valued, and all parties bias themselves towards shorter productions due to current producers' desires to complete their turn (without interruption) and potential producers' desires to take their turn as a producer (47). Building off of that, Herman refers to later, independent work by Schegloff that positions extended discourse productions not as the nexus of producer activity and consumer passivity, but rather as an "interactional achievement" over the joint bias towards shorter turns in discourse. If we consider video game designers and players as stratified narrative co-authors, the notion of turn-taking starts to parallel a common video game discourse practice: a dichotomy between "play" sequences and "watch" sequences, wherein cut scenes (filmic scenes produced via a video game's visual and aural world, rather than via camera) take the stage. This common discourse practice is employed in *Brothers*; players control the two characters for periods of upwards of 20 minutes. These play sequences are then punctuated by watch sequences, where the designers can be understood as exercising their degree of narrative authorship. These sequences are much briefer than play sequences; cut scenes extending beyond two minutes are rare in *Brothers*. This general temporal distribution—long play sequences and short cut scenes—suggests that, in the turn-taking practices of video games, player authorship is privileged. The same is true in *Brothers*.

What is the take-away from the turn-taking practices in video games? What does turn-taking accomplish? Herman points to research on storytelling contexts within which "collaborative telling or co-narration is an accepted, even expected, practice" (48). In these settings, members of the social unit experience a "sense of cohesion" with their storytelling partners. We can understand the player and designer turn-taking in video games as a sort of co-narration, whereby the player stands to come closer to the designer—and, more practically, their

intended messages and interpretations—than they might be in narrative media that do not afford mechanics for interaction with the storyworld. In other words, by sharing the role of authorship with players, designers make players amenable to the ideas they want to express narratively. In taking narratorial turns with the game's designers, players come closer to and accept *Brothers'* next three elements: the sequenced events, the storyworld-in-flux, and the quality of what it's like to experience that world.

Certain sequenced events happen along the brothers' path to the tree of life. Some essential events are guaranteed to happen in a complete playthrough, while minor, connective events are not. In discussing the essential and non-essential events of a narrative, we are calling on Chatman's "core and peripheral elements of story content," kernels and satellites (ref. in Herman 27). Derived from Tomashevskii's earlier distinction of "bound" and "free" motifs, kernels refer to essential plot points and satellites refer to events that might be removed from a particular telling of a story without marking it as different story. Aarseth explains:

> A kernel is what makes us recognize the story; take away the kernel and the story
> is no longer the same. If the wolf does not eat Red and her granny, the story
> cannot be recognized as Little Red Riding Hood, so the eating is a kernel. …
> Satellites are what can be replaced or removed while still keeping the story
> recognizable, but which defines the discourse; replace the satellites and the
> discourse is changed. Red may stop in the wood to pick a flower, or she may not;
> this choice does not cause us to reject or accept a particular rendering of the fairy
> tale. (2012: 131)

Like any other narrative, *Brothers* has kernels and satellites. The father will always be sick, prompting the journey. The brothers will always befriend a troll and rescue his wife. The older brother will always die. Those kernel events define the story of *Brothers*.

However, player authorship enters into the game between events like those. Players have the option of adding to the story by pursuing non-mandatory interactions in the shape of non-playable characters (NPCs) and side puzzles. The NPCs are mostly situated around the civilized town that the brothers depart from on their journey. Interacting with these characters as the brothers shows off their character during early stages of the game. For instance, one NPC is a woman sweeping the yard outside her home. When interacting with the woman as the older brother, players see an animation of the older brother helping her sweep up. When interacting with her with the younger brother, players see an animation where the younger brother charms her by spinning the broom in his hands like a baton. Interactions like these (pictured below) demonstrate the simple qualities of each character: the older brother is dutiful, and the younger brother is playful. Optional side quests are similar, but slightly more intricate, requiring players to solve small puzzles. One example is that of the suicidal man. (*Brothers*, while whimsical, deals with some dark themes.) By wandering down a dead end path, the brothers come upon the man hanging himself from a tree next to his burned house and the corpses of his family. The older brother supports his weight, while the younger brother climbs up the tree to untie the rope. As the man sobs, players can find a hidden path behind the burned house, get inside, and retrieve a music box. Delivering it to the man dries his tears; after a fade to black, he has buried his loved ones and can take comfort in the music. This side puzzle completed, the player can return to the main path and continue to the next kernel event in the brothers' journey.

That side puzzle with the suicidal man does not affect the trajectory of the brothers' narrative in any way. It is an entirely isolated event that players would not feel they missed should they have overlooked the path down to the burned house. Still, it is a satellite event for players that choose to participate in it. Bryan, in rethinking Aarseth's 1997 model of ergodicism with relationship to video game narratives, offers a model for considering the types of influence players have over video game stories. The model is a 2x3 matrix, reconstructing ergodicism into either uncertain path-making (implicit) or clear path-making (explicit) control over kernels and satellites (dynamic), just satellites (relative), or no narrative elements (arbitrary). *Brothers*, then, offers an explicit, relative ergodicism in that players feel certain that their intervention (choosing to go down a path and complete a puzzle) makes that event a part of the story, though it is only a satellite, and the event has no bearing on the story's more essential elements.

If event sequencing requires moderate player authorship, I argue that Herman's third element of narrative, world-making/world disruption, is the element players participate least actively in. As with the other elements, *Brothers* fulfills its narrative responsibilities by creating a storyworld-in-flux. However, unlike other games where players might have more influence over the physical and narrative worlds—*Minecraft*'s large, manipulable maps, for example— *Brothers*' physical and narrative worlds are dictated from the start. The physical world is large, sending the brothers through immense underground caverns and across battlefields strewn with

the corpses of warring giants. The brothers' path, however, is mostly confined. It is unicursal. There is a way—*one* way—to proceed across the landscape, and that path is largely mediated by small puzzles. The world itself is not an aspect of the narrative that offers much influence to the players. The unicursal path confines players to one way to proceed, while the world's size makes players feel small. Then consider the in-flux component of the storyworld: the father's illness throws the brothers' world into disequilibrium. But, because the narrative kernels are not manipulable by the player, the player has no influence over the resolution of that disequilibrium. The older brother will always die. The younger brother will return home with the life-saving water, rescuing the father. The game will always conclude on a scene of the father crying over his son's grave. *Brothers'* storyworld is prototypically narrative: there is a world-in-flux, and the actions of the characters move to bring that world to a new equilibrium. Players, however, have little influence over that process.

Herman's final element of narrative is "qualia," or "what it's like" for characters to experience the story. In *Brothers*, we can see the influence of turn-taking on qualia. One of the video game's central narrative themes is companionship. As the brothers progress spatially and temporally along their journey, the brothers become closer companions. The quality of "what it's like" is communicated across all available semiotic modes, including in the aural/visual filmic cut scenes where the brothers struggle and support each other at difficult points along their path. However, that theme also permeates the mechanics that define the play sequences. Players interpret the experience of growth in sequence with the characters as they adjust to and improve with the unique control scheme. Rather than being delivered a filmic narrative about growing companionship, players have a hand—two, in fact—in crafting that story and its messages. That

co-narration, or shared narrative authorship, makes the feeling of what it's like for the brothers more clear and identifiable.

In qualia, the what-it's-like element of narratives, Herman identifies the important role that narrative plays in human lives: "Narrative, I argue, is a mode of representation tailor-made for gauging the felt quality of lived experiences" (138). For Herman, the more or less concerned with qualia a text is, the more or less it can be described as prototypically narrative. Narratives capture our attention by encoding "in their very structure a way of experiencing events" (157). Stories are structured in the same way as consciousness: over time, through a subjective lens. By virtue of their "temporal and perspectival configuration[, stories emulate] the what-it's-like dimension of conscious awareness itself." Herman argues that narratives are both ways we represent our consciousness to others and ways we understand our and others' experiences. I suggest that video games employ the same perspectival natures and temporal distributions as other storytelling media, and therefore have similar abilities to speak to the qualia of conscious awareness. Just as a print narrative uses text to communicate subjective experiences over the course of time, video games communicate via their set of semiotic channels over the course of time. These temporally plotted communications lead readers and players through experiences in tandem with characters.

Accepting Herman's argument that narrative is "tailor-made" for the translation of what it's like to undergo certain experiences, video games seem particularly well-suited to the narrative task due to their interactivity. Video game interactivity pushes new boundaries because players are seemingly in control of the games' events. *Brothers*, in its handling of the basic elements of narrative, provides a strong example. When players take authorship by playing out the brothers' journey (i.e. participating in turn-taking with cut scenes), they are engaging with

the storyworld. Choosing to pursue certain satellite events (at all or instead of alternatives) is also

a measure of player choice/engagement. The interactivity that engages players of *Brothers*

creates shared experiences; in co-authoring the narrative of *Brothers*, players experience

increased closeness to the qualia of its companionship story. Indeed, video games seem to serve

the consciousness-sharing role of narratives quite well.

Rhetoric: Rhetorical Games, Agency, and Play

Thus far, I have suggested recognizing video games as semiotic and narrative texts. Understanding video games as a type of text required exploring the history of textuality and recognizing a twentieth century broadening of the term *text*. Understanding video games as rhetorical requires a similar attention to the history, both ancient and recent, of *rhetoric*. Rhetoric stems back to ancient Greece, 2,500 years ago, when it referred specifically to persuasive oral communication: "Rhetoric in ancient Greece—and by extension classical rhetoric in general—meant public speaking for civic purposes.… Rhetoric was oral and it was public" (Bogost 2007: 15). Classical rhetoric was concerned with the "faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (Aristotle I.2). However, some work has been done in the interim between the Aristotle's day and the present to broaden the term to the point where one can understand video games as rhetorical objects.

One of the theorists most responsible for the broadening of the definition of rhetoric is Kenneth Burke. Burke respects and recognizes the importance of oral persuasion to rhetoric when he defines "the basic function of rhetoric [as] the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents" (41). Rhetoric is rooted in verbal communication, and practitioners of rhetoric traditionally have persuasive goals in mind. They want to change attitudes or actions. Burke, however, expands his notion of rhetoric beyond that traditional understanding. Identifying persuasion to *attitude* as a site for expansion, Burke writes:

> Thus the notion of persuasion to attitude would permit the application of
> rhetorical terms to purely poetic structures; the study of lyrical devices might be
> classed under the head of rhetoric, when these devices are considered for their

power to induce or communicate states of mind to readers, even though the kinds

of assent evoked have no overt, practical outcome. (50)

In bringing "lyrical devices" into a conception of rhetoric, Burke welcomes in a wealth of less explicitly persuasive or "practical" works. This contemporary notion of rhetoric, then, allows for rhetorical analysis that goes beyond recognizing the means through which people are brought to support different causes and individuals. Burke opens the door for rhetorical analysis that considers the means available to artists who may simply aspire to share an experience with an audience.

The notion of shared experience, in fact, is key to Burke's broadened understanding of rhetoric. Burke places importance on the idea of *identification* (explained via a companion term, *consubstantiation*) as an important part of rhetoric, practical and persuasive or not. Burke argues that a primary goal of rhetoric is to make the listener identify with the speaker: "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his" (55). In Burke's understanding of rhetoric, art and argument can only be achieved by bringing the audience to identify with the rhetorician. Again, when Burke calls on identification, he is thinking about it very closely with consubstantiation. To identify with someone or something is to be of the same substance.

I have shown Burke's expansion of the concept of rhetoric to include "lyrical devices," but that is not his only expansion. He paired the conceptual broadening with a formal broadening. Burke recognized rhetoric in more than just verbal forms of communication: "Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is 'meaning,' there is 'persuasion'" (172). In Burke's writing, Bogost understands an embrace of "the broadness of

human symbolic production in the abstract" (2007: 21). In seeing all persuasion as rhetorical, Bogost interprets Burke as welcoming in all sorts of nonverbal, persuasive media to the domain of rhetoric.

Burke offers a broad, two-part concept of rhetoric: traditionally, as persuasive towards attitude and action, and contemporarily, as "elegance, clarity, and creativity in communication" (Bogost 2007: 20). In addition to the broader conception, Burke gestures towards a broader domain for rhetoric: new media, which use symbols, therefore meaning, and subsequently persuasion and rhetoric. There is very little doubt that video games can be rhetorical in both senses: effective in persuasion and elegant in communicating ideas. Video game scholar Ian Bogost demonstrates the wide variety of things that can and have been done with video games in his 2011 book, *How to do Things with Videogames*, which has chapters ranging from *Art* to *Electioneering* and from *Empathy* to *Promotion*.

In his earlier book, *Persuasive Games*, Bogost defines the type of rhetoric video games use, no matter their goal: procedural rhetoric. In describing *procedurality*, Bogost writes, "Only procedural software actually represent process with process. This is where the particular power of procedural authorship lies, in its native ability to depict processes" (2007: 14). Those sentences are brief, but dense with meaning. I see three important points. First, Bogost simply defines procedurality as the central notion behind representing processes with processes. Procedural rhetoric is at work in representing complex systems of actions with complex systems of actions. Second, Bogost contrasts this procedural rhetoric and representation with other forms of rhetoric where processes are represented by other means, "description (writing) or depiction (images)" (2011: 14). Third, and finally, Bogost describes the application of procedural rhetoric as a form of authoring, connecting us back to Haswell & Haswell's central concern for English

studies. Bogost suggests understanding video games as a medium wherein procedurality is the central mode of communicating ideas.

I can begin to see how Bogost intends for us to think about video games as persuasive via processes and systems, but I feel that I have only reached a partial conclusion. I see the authorship of processes as the work of the game designer as rhetorician, but what is the role of the player? The previous sections have suggested understanding video games as a medium wherein players collapse the potential of video game texts into singular experiences and co-author video game narratives within designers' boundaries. What, then, is the agency of the player through the lens of rhetorical analysis—or, perhaps better phrased, what is the rhetorical agency of players?

I approach the question with a vague notion of agency as the ability of agents to decisively interact with and affect their environments. In my research, I have identified scholarship that supports that understanding, or one close to it. Bogost calls on Janet Murray's notion of agency in *Persuasive Games*; Murray's definition demands "genuine embodied participation in an electronic environment. Rather, such environments must be meaningfully responsive to user input" (qtd. in Bogost 2007: 42). Agency as embodied participation that invokes a response works with my initial notion of agency. Not only does Murray's idea of agency support my own tentative notion; the idea strikes me as quite familiar. Murray's agency seems to overlap quite a bit with the concept of *meaningful play*, introduced in *Rules of Play* by Salen & Zimmerman as what "occurs when the relationships between actions and outcomes in a game are both discernable and integrated into the larger context of the game." They continue by emphasizing the importance of meaningful play: "Creating meaningful play is the goal of successful game design" (34). Salen & Zimmerman suggest meaningful play as the shape that

agency takes when players interact with video games, and seem to agree with Murray on the importance of causal actions and discernable effects. In intersecting Murray's agency with Salen & Zimmerman's concept of meaningful play, I begin to conceptualize play as the agency of players within video game texts.

My understanding of agency is complicated, however, by Marilyn Cooper. Cooper suggests rethinking the causal and intentional power of agents: "Agents are very often not aware of their intentions, they do not directly cause changes, and the choices they make are not free from influence" (421). Initially, the idea of bringing this seemingly disempowered notion of agency to my concept of the video game player was daunting; what happens to the player as co-author of an interactive narrative? Does that dissolve if the player cannot be understood as conscious and willful? Ultimately, I think not. Further reflection leads me to recognize Cooper's models of rhetorical agents and agency to be immensely constructive to understanding video game players and play. In the above statement, Cooper describes agents as unconscious of their intentions, only indirectly causal, and influenced (rather than independent). Cooper's notion of "individual agency as the process through which organisms create meanings through acting into the world and changing their structure in response to the perceived consequences of their actions" (420) seems quite akin to the experience of players engaging with some video games. Players are often as unaware, indirect, and influenced as Cooper's rhetorical agents. Play, however, is the player's agency. Play is the way by which players act into the video game world and begin to discern what they are and are not capable of. Play is what players do when they interact with video games as systems and see how video games respond to them.

Play as rhetorical agency, therefore, seems to be a central idea to my exploration of video game rhetoric. How, then, is play structured? Indirectly, Zimmerman says: "The game designer

creates structures of rules directly, but only indirectly creates the experience of play when the

rules are enacted by players" (28). Indeed, though play is a central concern for players, designers

do not directly create play. Instead, they create systems of rules, the rigid boundaries within

which meaningful, compelling play experiences take place. Of course, rules take various shapes

in video games. In the *Tycoon* series of video games, wherein players attempt to create

monstrously successful amusement parks, zoos, and all other manner of enterprise, economic

rules demand players maintain awareness of the various components of their business so as to

maximize profits. On the contrary, in a game such as *Portal*, physical rules (gravity, various

degrees of friction, etc.) demand players identify specific puzzle solutions. These rule sets create

a possibility space for rhetorical play situations to transpire: entrepreneurial mastery or failure

and puzzle resolution/stalling respectively. Internal systems of rules are an important way of

structuring play, but not the only way. In addition to these internal rules, external tools are also

available to the video game developer. Input devices (traditionally keyboards and computer mice

or controllers, but now also voice and video command devices) are the means by which players

engage with the internal rules of a game. Bogost says it best: "This is really what we do when we

play videogames: we explore the possibility space its rules afford by manipulating the game's

controls" (2007: 43). In *Brothers*, I find a game that makes use of its controller as a rhetorical

device.

Rhetorical Play in *Brothers*

Of the traditional (persuasive) and contemporary (lyrical) forms of rhetoric suggested by

Burke, *Brothers* certainly belongs to the latter category. *Brothers* is the type of text with the

"power to induce or communicate states of mind to readers, even though the kinds of assent

evoked have no overt, practical outcome" (Burke 50). Indeed, in *Brothers*, I do not see a text

meant to influence its audience to action. Instead, I see a game that uses action to influence. Pushing the intersection of Burke and the video game further, I understand *Brothers* as a video game that aspires towards identification. *Brothers* is constructed to invite players to participate in the brothers' experience of challenge, companionship, and loss. Burke, in 1950, offers a concept of how shared experience or action results in consubstantiation: "For substance, in the old philosophies, was an act; and a way of life is an acting-together; and in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them consubstantial" (Burke 21). Burke imagines an active identification between audience and rhetorician. In narrative media such as *Brothers*, however, I think that identification between audience and characters is a more common goal. In playing *Brothers*, players act together with, and therefore achieve a sort of identification with the brothers and their experience.

However, it is not just *that* players share an experience with the brothers. It is *how* players share that experience, how they access it. As with any other video game, players participate in *Brothers* by using an input device. The video game's creative director is very clear about how one should play the game. Fares says that "you need to have a controller. It's very important. We're going to put a big sign up saying that you need to use a controller, because it's so based on a controller experience." Because it is so important to understand why playing *Brothers* is an emotionally impactful experience, I will reiterate the control scheme. Players control both characters simultaneously throughout the game. The left hand controls the older brother (left stick moves him throughout the environment, and the left trigger engages him with interactive elements in the world around him), and the right hand controls the younger brother equally. This control scheme breaks the conventions of the medium. The majority of games only ask the player to manipulate one character's movement and action at a given time. In most

games, the left stick is assigned to manipulate movement, while the right stick is assigned to manipulate the camera, whether that camera uses a first-person, third-person over-the-shoulder, or third-person elevated perspective. Various buttons, including the triggers, then, are assigned to various types of interaction.

Brothers breaks that mold, which immediately impacts players in two ways. First, experienced video game players are cognizant of the game's rejection of formal conventions. Players can recognize in the game's departure from conventions as part of an overarching ambition to innovate. Second, and perhaps most importantly, the game takes players out of their comfort zone. When I played *Brothers* for the first time, I was really quite bad at it. I had no experience with the control scheme, and I found myself ramming the characters together accidentally, or completely losing track of which hand was controlling characters, which required me to pause and recalibrate myself.

Players are asked to depart from this starting point of difficulty on a journey of cooperation. The game's puzzles require using the big brother (left hand) to handle some tasks, such as lifting the younger brother over tall obstacles, pulling heavy levers, and swimming (the younger brother, afraid of the water, clings on to cross bodies of water), and the younger brother (right hand) to handle others, such as sneaking through tight gaps that the older brother cannot pass. All of these different responsibilities are incremental examples of *Brothers'* procedural rhetoric. In playing the game, players perform all of the aforementioned actions, gradually becoming increasingly comfortable with the initially confounding control scheme. The player's process of improving control seems representative of the brothers' process of growing companionship. Drakes explains:

There's an interesting parallel here between mechanics and in-game experience. You start out the game admittedly clumsily, as your two hands, which comfortably and instinctively control one character in just about any other game, are tasked with controlling two.… What's interesting is learning to sing with that control scheme.… It becomes synonymous with how two people might grow into working well together.

As *Brothers* approaches its conclusion, its control scheme is used to elegantly and powerfully convey emotions. Near the end of the narrative, the older brother is fatally stabbed by a temptress (who is revealed to be a giant spider in disguise). As he lays wounded, players navigate the younger brother to the top of the Tree of Life and collect water to bring home to the father. When they return to the base of the tree, players see that the older brother has died. A cut scene shows the younger brother in mourning, while the embodied spirit of the older brother comforts him. After a dark sequence in which players are made to manipulate the younger brother as he slowly shovels dirt into the older brother's grave, the younger brother's return home is all that remains.

Players take control of the younger brother at the end of his return trip. The player is forced to traverse water with the younger brother, something the character has not been able to do throughout the game. When approached with this situation, the player's training says to use the right trigger—younger brother interact—to cross the stream. However, right trigger only leads the younger brother to perform an animation where he shakes his head with worry. To progress, players have to do something counterintuitive: hold the left trigger—calling on the older brother—to provide the younger brother with the courage to swim across to his destination (pictured below). After crossing the water, players have to complete two more tasks (also pictured) that were once impossible without the older brother: pulling a heavy lever to cross a

bridge and scaling a tall obstacle. At both turns, pressing the right trigger is inadequate; the younger brother cannot do it alone. Again, pressing the left trigger calls on the strength of the older brother to overcome what was once insurmountable for the younger brother. By necessitating that players utilize the left trigger (literally assigned to older brother interaction) to perform some more abstract task (summoning the memory or spirit of the deceased character), *Brothers* asks its players to contemplate the meanings behind simple button presses. Ultimately, the ending to *Brothers* represents one of the most emotionally charged gaming experiences I have had and suggests possibilities for

imbuing elements that are often taken for granted, such as controller input schemes, with meaningful ideas.

Conclusion: Uniting Video Games with English studies

In the preceding sections, I have made some suggestions regarding the ways in which the frameworks of English studies can elucidate what is happening when developers create and consumers play video games, particularly games with ambition to innovate like *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*. As an individual with quite a bit of personal experience with the medium, I am biased towards the idea that video games are inherently worth the effort of understanding through these critical lenses. Fortunately, however, there is a better argument for the value of understanding the expressive capacities of video games: namely, their wide popularity and upward trajectory in American culture. Statistics from the Entertainment Software Association's (ESA) 2014 edition of Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry (on right) demonstrate the large amount of people that self-reported as a player of some form of video games in 2013: "59% of Americans play video games" (2). Further, "The average U.S. household owns at least one dedicated game console, PC, or smartphone" (2). In addition to being extremely popular, the video game medium is quite lucrative. In 2013,
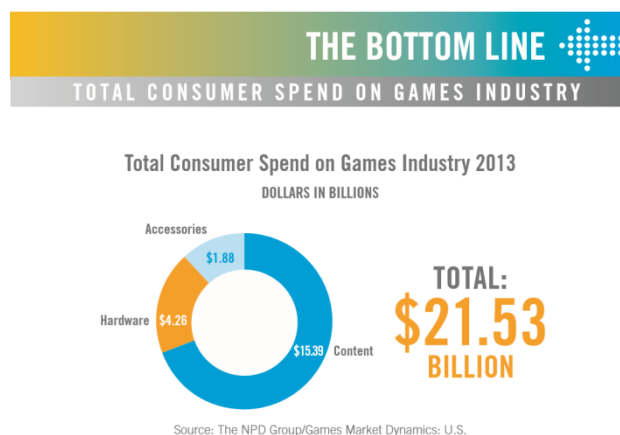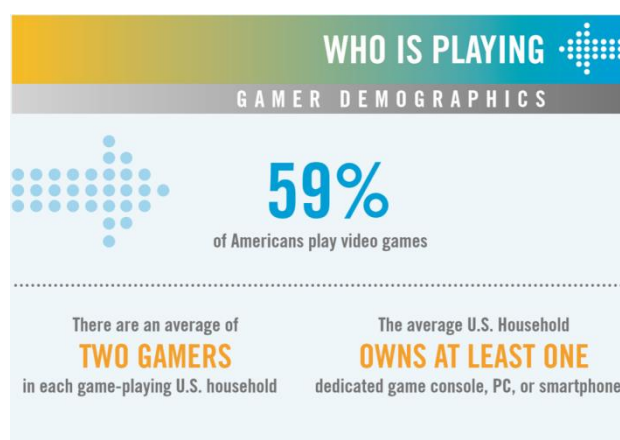
consumers spent $21.53 billion on video game hardware, accessories, and content (13). These figures demonstrate that Americans are both interested and invested in engaging with the complex systems we term video games.

My research has suggested a wealth of ways in which the rhetorical frameworks of semiotics and textual studies, narrative studies, and rhetorical studies can and, in many cases, already have been implemented to create understandings of how video games can communicate ideas, tell stories, and form arguments. So many scholars have already demonstrated those virtues, the value that English studies perspectives can offer to understanding video games. I am interested in ways in which that the relationship between video games and English studies might be mutually beneficial. In other words, what can video games offer back to English?

I suggest two offerings: first, a library of new texts for consideration in formal critical settings, and second, the power to invigorate a discipline that is often described as declining. First, let us consider video games as candidates for English research and education. Though much of the discourse surrounding video games (including this very paper) is concerned with delineating how video games are distinct from other communicative media, my research has identified several ways in which video games can be understood as quite similar to other media. For example, Bogost considers video games as rhetorical via procedurality; Aarseth considers video games as a potential type of literature: "ergodic literature," or literature of non-trivial effort. These examples suggest ways in which video games can be made quite comprehensible through the lenses of English studies. It does not seem like a tremendous leap, then, to anticipate their implementation in English classrooms. In fact, The Ohio State University's English Department has officially announced its introduction of "sections of the second-level composition course, 2367.01, titled, 'Critical Analysis of Video Games,' offered in the fall of

2015" (Department of English). Initial, direct treatment of video games within English studies classroom is already on the way.

The second suggestion, that video games might reinvigorate English studies, demands a bit more context. A common concern in contemporary English departments is with decreased undergraduate enrollment. In a recent article, Flaherty introduces statistics demonstrating both small and substantial downturns (e.g. Maryland's 40% decrease in declared English majors in three years) in English department course enrollments and major declarations at various institutions of higher learning. She uses the statistics and interviews with the chairs of both struggling and successful programs to present a picture of English studies as declining due to its perception as both impractical in a difficult job market and generally out of touch with students' interests. Flaherty cites counter-actions to that concern that English studies programs are out of touch, including programs that have expanded their curriculum to include "digital humanities" work: "Stanford University, for example, recently launched a new joint major in English and computer science." In this portrayal of English as out-of-touch, introducing video game studies into English departments makes a lot of sense. The medium is undeniably interesting to a young audience, and bringing video games into the fold of English could be one method for meeting students where they are.

However, there are other variations on the argument that English as a discipline is declining, and one significant variation comes from William Chace in 2007. Chace identifies the percentage of total undergraduate degrees made up by English majors as steadily declining since the 1970s, and importantly attributes most of this downfall to English's ever-increasing breadth: "English has become less and less coherent as a discipline and, worse, has come near exhaustion as a scholarly pursuit." Straying from English's roots in traditional literary criticism becomes

problematic for Chace, who sarcastically says, "No sense of duty remains toward works of English or American literature; amateur sociology or anthropology or philosophy or comic books or studies of trauma among soldiers or survivors of the Holocaust will do." For the traditionalist who believes that broadening the library of texts under examination in English departments is an essential element to undoing English studies, video games are not a likely source of optimism.

There may, however, be good reason to take up a stance opposite Chace's. Bérubé suggests that the "decline" of English has not been a steady downward trend over the last forty years, but rather mostly took place during the 1970s; he addresses the idea that expansions of the scope of English studies are culpable for decreased enrollment:

> But most of the things blamed for the decline in enrollments happened after the decline in enrollments had stopped. Theory, race/gender/class/sexuality, jargon, popular culture ... those things were hard to find in humanities departments in the 1970s. They became part of the fabric of the material in our end of campus in the 1980s and 1990s. And a funny thing happened in the 1980s and 1990s: Enrollments crept back up a bit. (Bérubé)

Bérubé suggests that the decline of English studies may be overblown, and he argues that the broad concerns of English studies introduced at the end of the twentieth century actually sparked small increases in enrollment. I suggest that video games can do the same today. Video games, this tremendously popular and influential medium, have already begun to find a home in English studies. The theoretical frameworks of our discipline offer insights into how the medium in general and specific games create meaning, tell stories, and communicate ideas. In return for the critical lenses through we which we attempt to make sense of them, video games offer a

popularity, newness, and vigor to English studies, a discipline which—whether or not it is truly

"in decline"—is worth energizing.

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[1] While Herman refers to short stories like Hemingway's as monomodal, that label is controversial. Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola would argue that no text, even a traditional book text finds its meaning strictly in the words it uses. By virtue of its use of the book form, such a text calls on various sorts of meanings tied up in book culture: "Dream and value and self and culture and world seem to be fully enclosed within literacy, objectified in—and not separable from—the book" (356).