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**Procedural Identification:  
Algorithmic Role-Playing in Video Games**

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**Procedural Identification:  
Algorithmic Role-Playing in Video Games**

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Jennifer. Without your love, nothing in my life would be possible.

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## **Abstract**

### **Procedural Identification: Algorithmic Role-Playing in Video Games**

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Video games and role-playing games both possess the ability to structure the player's experience of themselves around their underlying and internal structures. Tabletop role-playing games do so through complex rules involving random dice rolls whereas video games do so through their basic algorithmic and software structure. This thesis investigates how the combination of properties from both media in the form of video role-playing games, or vRPGs, can impact and structure the player's sense of identification with the player character. This thesis draws heavily on Wendy Chun, Alexander Galloway and Ian Bogost's theories of procedurality in games as well as both modern and post-modern theories of identity and identification in order to argue that vRPGs have the ability to actively guide and construct the player's identification. When looked at as procedural media, one quickly discovers that games are capable of interacting and responding to the player. I chose to call this quality of games "procedural identification". This thesis also foregrounds the importance of the played aspect of games in order to highlight the fact that the sense of identification that comes from playing a

game is both active and the result of the player's interactions with the game's programmatic interface. In essence, the meaning of a game emerges only during and after play. By structuring this play according to underlying algorithmic processes, games are capable of structure the player's interaction and experience in unique and incredibly rich ways.

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## Introduction

“What do I roll for thunderous smite?” I ask the group. I should know by this point but I am still new to *Dungeons & Dragons* and I like to make sure I get things right the first time. “2d6”, one of the party members replies, meaning two six-sided dice. I roll high on both and attack the ghost that has plagued our party since the first session. Our cleric had just cast a spell that would cause the ghost to take double damage on its next hit and I decided to unload everything. My hit killed the ghost immediately, but rather than simply saying this the gamemaster, the person running the game and designing the encounters the rest of the players in the party faced, first asked me to describe what my character’s thunderous smite looked like. I replied that it was the sort of unnaturally bright yellow that you only see in movies or video games. The gamemaster then used this and the term “anime-esque explosion” in his description of how the ghost died, which got some hearty laughter from the rest of the party. Afterwards, the cleric whispered to congratulate me on our teamwork. Though my character was the party’s tank, meant to soak up close combat damage to protect the characters in our party using bows or ranged magic, he rarely got to land the killing blow on enemies. This was a triumphant moment for me, was also filled with a distinct sense of pride for my character. We had both proven our worth to the party once and for all.

Having killed our foe, the session ends and I turn on my PS4 to start playing *The Witcher 3*. After loading the game, my character, Geralt, is seated on his horse, just as I had left him. With no friends to banter with, either in the virtual world of the game or outside of it in my apartment, I open the menu and look at the tasks laid available to me. I saw the opportunity to hunt a ghost in this game as well and think that it must be fate. I go to talk to the man offering the bounty and discover that he and his fellow villagers believe this is the ghost of a girl who was

jilted at the altar. The game gives me the options of assuaging his fears or brushing them aside to haggle over the bounty and I choose the kinder option. Geralt's compassion comes through the soft, soothing way he assures this man that the ghost has no recollection of its former life.

Though I did not come up with these words as I may have for my *Dungeons & Dragons* character earlier, I still feel closer to Geralt because I was allowed to choose them over the more callous answer. There is no reason here to pick the more compassionate answer and I have no idea if it may benefit me down the line, but if I am to spend the fifty odd hours with Geralt that I know I likely will from past experience, then I would like him to be a person I enjoy playing as.

What just began this introduction are two descriptions of my experiences of two very different role-playing games. The first is from a recent session of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the first and to this day most popular tabletop RPG. The second comes from the 2015 video game RPG *The Witcher 3*. These passages and similar ones in later chapters are sometimes termed "real-play journals" and they are meant to communicate the experience of actually playing a game more legibly than a strict play-by-play or script might. What I have tried to make apparent here at the beginning is that both media are appealing in large part because of the feelings of control and identification players have over the character they play. However, as these passages should also begin to indicate, the way in which tabletop RPGs and video game RPGs build this sense of identification is vastly different. This thesis, then, is meant to illuminate how and why video games in general and video game RPGs (or vRPGs) in particular are able to create such a powerful feeling of identification in a way that is distinct from tabletop RPGs. Although many of the terms and mechanical aspects of both tabletop RPGs and vRPGs will be explained over the course of the next few chapters, these early play journals are intended to foreground the importance of actually playing a game and emphasize that identification in role-playing games

regardless of format is an active process where different aspects of the game such as dialogue options, exploration, interactions with non-player characters and major narrative events impact the player in real-time as they play it.

Role-playing as a game predates video games as a medium and stretches back millennia into human pre-history.<sup>1</sup> My time spent traversing dungeons in *Dungeons & Dragons* or slaying monsters as Geralt of Rivia in *The Witcher 3* has its roots in the human practice of mimicry that predates any extant culture or form of historical writing. Roger Caillois describes the pleasure of this ancient strain of mimicry as “being or passing for another” while also calling it “incessant invention.”<sup>2</sup> While he also states that this type of mimicry inherently resists the traditional rules of play unlike modern RPGs, their pleasure is still located in being, passing as or inventing another. vRPGs, however, have distinct and identifiable roots in tabletop roleplaying games.<sup>3</sup> The first game in the tabletop role-playing medium, *Dungeons & Dragons*, was released in 1974. Tabletop role-playing games were from the outset meant to be a collaborative artistic creation. A group of friends gathers around a table to create and then role-play as characters in elaborate science fiction or fantasy settings.

Though each player typically controls one character, every character in an RPG is the collaborative product of interaction between all of the game’s players. Their personalities, vices, strengths, weakness and identities emerge slowly over the course of many sessions. Though most tabletop RPGs have elaborate rulebooks dictating game mechanics, often decided through rolling dice of variously numbered sides as described earlier, players are free to modify or even outright ignore these rules as they see fit.<sup>4</sup> The character that emerges out of the process of playing a tabletop RPG is entirely unique but always in some way a reflection of the player’s identity. The freedom offered by many tabletop RPGs due to their fantasy or science fiction settings and the

accompanying range of species and races present in these settings mean that it is aspects of the player's personality, morality or beliefs that are most legible as identity markers in tabletop RPGs.

Although vRPGs may have grown out of tabletop role-playing, their generic qualities are vastly different largely due to the constraints and affordances of video games as a medium. First and foremost, many vRPGs are single-player only experiences. Even those that are not, such as massively multiplayer online RPGs (MMORPGs or MMOs), still have an abundance of characters controlled by the game's software that the player has little or no ability to directly impact or even interact with in the first place. Though the player is still taking up the role of their own character in a traditional vRPG, they are often not surrounded by a group doing the same. Furthermore, the player does not have anywhere near the same freedom even with their own character as dialogue is typically pre-written and, today, fully voice acted. Though offering the player a range of dialogue options is becoming a more and more common feature of vRPGs, this still pales in comparison to the near absolute freedom offered by traditional tabletop roleplaying.

As a result of the lack of creativity afforded to the player in addition to the frequent loss of the performative group aspect of role-playing, it would seem safe to assume that vRPGs are not capable of producing the same sort of identificatory experiences as tabletop RPGs. However, vRPGs and video games in general are quite plainly a powerful identificatory medium as attested to by the scores of books and articles written on the subject, as well as by the decades long and continuing popularity of vRPGs and their heroes.<sup>5</sup> What is needed, then, is an explanation of how and why video games and vRPGs in particular are capable of being a powerful identificatory medium that takes into account their unique qualities and affordances. In order to do so, I have chosen to term this quality of video games procedural identification.

## **DEFINING PROCEDURAL IDENTIFICATION**

My usage of “procedural” originated from Ian Bogost’s concept of procedural rhetoric, which he defines as, “the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions.”<sup>6</sup> His invocation of “rule-based” harkens back to Janet Murray’s notion of procedural authorship, which she defines as “writing the rules by which the texts appear as well as writing the texts themselves.”<sup>7</sup> From both of these definitions, we can see that rule-based generation and interaction is core to procedurality. Though Janet Murray applies procedural authorship to computation more generally, Bogost narrows it down to games because of their ability to “[generate] moving images in accordance with complex rules that simulate real or imagined physical and cultural processes” and also because they, “rely on user interaction as a mediator”.<sup>8</sup> As these definitions show, procedurality is a core aspect of video games that goes deeper than their ability to produce rhetoric, narrative or identification. Video games are procedural on their most basic level because of the underlying algorithms that drive all of their most basic functions and thus structure everything built on top of them.

However, Bogost’s theory of procedural rhetoric is useful in large part because it demonstrates how this underlying procedurality structures even higher-level functions of video games. In Bogost’s case, this is their ability to structure rhetorical arguments. However, it is also precisely what allows for my conception of procedural identification. Unlike other identificatory media such as cinema, television, or tabletop RPGs, video games are capable of structuring their identificatory process through their underlying procedurality. Though both vide games and tabletop RPGs are interactive, the experience of a video game is affected at all levels by its procedurality, whether that is the invisible boundaries keeping the player within the game’s world or the way dialogue choices often set specific narrative events in action. No other media combines these unique qualities in the same way as video games and vRPGs in particular.

Writing on the formal qualities of tabletop RPGs, Daniel Mackay argues that they are what Roland Barthes would call a structuralist activity because they “establish and prescribe the mode of subjectivity of the player himself, actually structuring the player’s self-identity according to the demands of the form”.<sup>9</sup> Video games were a nascent medium at best at the time of Barthes’ comments on the structuralist activity. Although it would take decades for the vRPG to reach any semblance of maturity, they almost perfectly fit his definition of a structuralist activity. Barthes expands on his own theory by stating, “the goal of all structuralist activity... is to reconstruct an ‘object’ in such a way as to manifest thereby the rules of functioning (the “functions”) of this object.”<sup>10</sup> As structuralist activities, vRPGs, and indeed all video games, fundamentally structure the experience of themselves around their internal algorithmic logic. Because the structure of a video game is inherently programmatic, the experience of it must be as well. This, then, is ultimately why identification becomes procedural in a vRPG when it can remain far more liminal or open ended even in a traditional tabletop RPG. Though Mackay is certainly correct to consider tabletop RPGs a structuralist activity, they lack the absolute and algorithmic structures of video games while also downplaying the control of each individual player through a layer of interpretation and performativity..<sup>11</sup> The experience of a vRPG takes place entirely between the player and the software and any element of group performance is absent outside of MMOs. Video games, in other words, are structuralist activities on a much more basic, ontological level than tabletop RPGs.

The identification aspect of procedural identification was inspired by Adrienne Shaw’s writing on identity and identification in video games, which she bases off of, “theories of identity, in part because... identities and subjects are made in specific moments, through a sense of connection and via a process we can call *identification*”.<sup>12</sup> Shaw’s work in *Gaming at the*

*Edge* is largely ethnographic and she infers that the majority of her interviewees saw the identificatory process as “finding a connection with a character” despite their disparate personal definitions.<sup>13</sup> Shaw also takes issue with some games studies definitions of identification because she believes they “seem to... [stand] in for other processes, often meaning interactivity or engagement in a broad sense.”<sup>14</sup> Based off of the claims of her interviewees, Shaw actually ends up returning to psychoanalytic film studies based theories of identification that require players “to see a game character as a distinct entity from themselves in order to feel as though they could identify with it.” Shaw is not by any means the first person to return to film theory when analyzing identification in video games. Galloway does much the same throughout *Gaming*, particularly when he compares the first-person shooter’s perspective to the 1947 film *Lady in the Lake*.<sup>15</sup> In his oft-cited article “Playing At Being”, Bob Rehak too returns to film theory and to Christian Metz’s use of Lacanian psychoanalysis to theorize how the mirror stage functions similarly in video games as Metz claims it does in film.

Early on in “Playing At Being”, Rehak states that

“The video game avatar would seem to meet the criteria of Lacan’s *objet petit a*. Appearing on screen in place of the player, the avatar does double duty as self and other, symbol and index... But most significant... avatars differ from us through their ability to *live, die, and live again*... render[ing] in visible form their players’ actions—they complete an arc of desire.”<sup>16</sup>

Importantly, however, “Playing At Being” was written in 2002, a decade before many of the games that will be considered in this project were published. A good deal of the article is given over to a history of the development of avatars, which goes from a disembodied, third-person perspective in early arcade games such as *Space Invaders* up to modern (at the time) first person



shooters such as *Doom* and *Quake*. He prefaces this section by stating that the avatar's "correspondence to embodied reality consists of a mapping not of *appearance* but of *control*".<sup>17</sup> Today, graphical and technological advances mean that avatars can now map appearance as well.

However, Rehak's focus on control is still important and reveals something latent in his conception of identification. For Rehak, video games create identification as much through control as through the psychodynamics of the Lacanian mirror stage. Or, at the very least, control is the unique affordance that gives video games the identificatory power that film does not possess. The video game avatar possess an ability the film subject does not, the ability to reflect the player's control. Though Shaw strays away from relying on interactivity as a stand-in for identification, Rehak and his application of the Lacanian mirror stage make it clear that the interactive component of video games is indeed key to their ability to create a sense of identification between player and avatar. Procedural identification in turn functions in large part from discrete, identificatory moments that are presented to the player as in-game decisions with specific but almost always unknowable outcomes.

### **WHY ROLE-PLAYING GAMES?**

The programmatic nature of vRPGs was latent in tabletop RPGs from the very beginning. One of the very first tabletop roleplaying games released in 1977, *Dungeons & Dragons*, has an extensive set of rules that predetermines hundreds of different variables for the game and the world before the player ever begins a session. Most other tabletop RPGs follow in its footsteps and feature similarly elaborate and often book length manuals on their own unique setting, rules and mechanics. Furthermore, outcomes for actions taken by players in tabletop RPGs are typically determined by rolling one or more dice. In most systems, lower numbers correlate to poor outcomes and higher numbers to increasingly better ones. However, the most important

point where tabletop RPGs diverge from vRPGs is in the “gamemaster” or GM role. The gamemaster for a tabletop RPG has the potentially immense power to reshape or ignore the existing rules however they see fit. Balancing this power and control is indeed one of the most important duties a GM has. Players typically dislike being force fed a narrative or overly proscriptive rules by a GM, but players do often still need direction and guidance for truly productive sessions.

A gamemaster could, for example, interpret a poor dice roll from a player whose character is in a risky situation as anything ranging from minor injury to serious trauma or even death. Though this means that there is still a layer of the game that the other players have no control over, most or even all of the procedurality of the rules can be removed when it is present in the first place. Furthermore, as my journal that begins this intro indicates, the gamemaster sometimes delegates this creative control to the players themselves. It is considered good etiquette, for example, to allow the player to describe the killing blow on a monster and players are frequently asked to describe what their powers and abilities look like since tabletop RPGs lack the graphically rendered environments of vRPGs. This is where a great deal of the creativity of a tabletop RPG comes in and the procedurality falls away. The *Dungeons & Dragons* handbook might tell me to roll two six sided dice to determine the damage from thunderous smite, but it says nothing about what this power looks like or how it affects enemies. That interpretative and creative control of the game is almost entirely up to the discretion of the gamemaster and the players.

However, vRPGs fundamentally change the player’s relationship to the game by handing practically all of the gamemaster’s functions over to the software. As a result, the procedural aspects of vRPGs are far more pronounced and constitute an inextricable part of the game rather

than being a latent but potentially removable feature. To refer back to the earlier dice roll example, vRPGs do not possess or allow the same sort of interpretative creativity. Furthermore, the degree of control that the GM and players must so delicately balance in a tabletop RPG is also fundamentally changed in the move to vRPGs. In a vRPG, the player only has the control that the game allots them and yet the control they are allotted is absolute. A decision in a vRPG always has a specific and predetermined outcome that is set in motion by the game's procedural narrative structure and the player's decisions. Though all games are procedural, vRPGs are unique in the ways they incorporate the latent procedurality of tabletop RPGs as an inextricable formal quality. Of course, procedurality is hardly the only element of tabletop RPGs that is incorporated into vRPGs.

In his work on the performative aspect of role-playing games, Daniel Mackay incorporates some of Michel Foucault's work on the imposition of power and morality. He states that role-playing games can impose a universal morality because "the character's rise in level of power... and the boundaries that the drama of the game prescribe correspond exactly to Foucault's observations on 'the disciplinary technique'."<sup>18</sup> This can potentially be seen as yet another way that both tabletop RPGs and vRPGs allow the player to exert control over the game. In this case, this control is almost purely ludic as the player's rise in level makes them more powerful and thus able to control more and more of the game world. This sense of progression is also important for identification, however, because it can offer mirror the player's control over the narrative and give them the sense that their player character is growing and developing along a linear path.

Mackay later clarifies his usage of Foucault by adding that, "the structure of the game world would seem to make it unlikely that the players perform certain actions in the role of their

characters, for some actions are punished within the game rule's framework."<sup>19</sup> To reiterate, Mackay is strictly referring to tabletop role-playing games here and yet his descriptions map almost perfectly onto vRPGs. The primary difference is that vRPGs typically make it outright impossible for players to make decisions outside of the game's rules. In tabletop RPGs, outcomes are typically the joint result of a die-roll and the gamemaster's creativity. This creates a sort of time lag between decisions being made and the outcomes being produced during which players can discuss the game's rules out of character and sometimes even rethink their initial decision if the gamemaster is lenient. Alternately, as demonstrated earlier, players frequently make out of character jokes or references. Though the initial proceduralism of the dice roll is certainly present, it is surrounded on all sides by multiple levels of creativity and mechanical interpretation. In vRPGs, however, this proceduralism is more effectively hidden from the player because the game's software operates almost instantaneously and without the player's knowledge.

One other important argument that Mackay makes about tabletop RPGs is that, "while players may choose to identify with characters in the story, the story itself exists independent of them, separated by the distance the role provides."<sup>20</sup> Though he does not mention it here, one other important quality of tabletop RPGs that allows for this distance is the collective and performative elements they possess. The player of a tabletop RPG can distance themselves from their character because they understand that character to be the result of a collaborative performance. On the other hand, the player in a vRPG is not so easily separated from their character or from the story. Despite the personal creativity allowed by tabletop RPGs, individual players have a somewhat more limited amount of control over the entire narrative because of the other players involved. For example, if one person in my *Dungeons & Dragons* group wanted to

investigate a murder in town while the rest preferred to explore a dungeon then the entire group would almost certainly explore the dungeon because splitting the party is the one act that is verboten. In many vRPGs, the player has immense power to shape the narrative as they see fit because they are the only party actively making decisions. There is no chance of being out-voted by a larger party and much of the appeal of these games comes from the fact that they can be played multiple times in order to experience all of the different quests and the decisions the player can make. This increased level of control over the story is precisely what leads to the heightened identification in vRPGs as opposed to tabletop RPGs and even compared to other media.

Role-playing games in general are the primary focus of this project in large part because of the control they afford the player. Whether played on a tabletop or on a gaming console, RPGs broadly have in common the creation of a player character and the controllable interactions of that character with others in the game world. Although some vRPGs lack a true character creation process, they are still role-playing games because of the control they give the player over the narrative. This control and the decision making process that comes along with being capable of affecting and changing the game's narrative is what allows one to play a role in the first place in vRPGs. Though Rehak's "Playing at Being" includes the disembodied spacecraft of games such as *Space Invaders* as a role the player can take on, vRPGs are at base defined by giving the player control over the decisions their avatar actually makes in addition to control over their movement through space. Though other video game genres, like first person shooters for example, may have some surface level qualities in common, they very rarely afford the player the ability to exert control over the narrative of the game itself. Also important, however, is that RPGs also possess a "consistent, memorable setting within which characters can

interact.”<sup>21</sup> RPGs, then, are defined both by narrative control and spatial exploration as well as the programmatic constraints they put on player decision. As their interfaces open up the ability to control a narrative or explore a space, their algorithmic structure limits player actions in highly productive ways that open up new opportunities for socialization and identification.

## **SOFTWARE STUDIES AND VIDEO GAMES**

In order to fully explore the centrality of procedurality to this study, the field of software studies would be useful to bring in.. Though games are not always studied as software and although software studies often focuses on more traditional computing software, the two fields have immense potential to inform one another. This thesis will focus in particular on the work of Alexander Galloway and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun. Galloway has, in some of his writing, already laid much of the groundwork for investigating the uniquely procedural nature of video games while Chun’s work on software focuses on the complex ways it empowers users (or players, as the case may be) while simultaneously obscuring its own functioning.<sup>22</sup> Though it was written in 2006, almost a decade before many of the video games that will be discussed in this thesis were made, Galloway’s *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* provides a number of vital insights about the basic ontology of video games. Most important to this thesis is his statement that, “video games are actions”.<sup>23</sup> This notion of video games as actions reinforces Rehak’s remarks about the control offered by video games as central to their ability to create identification.

What Galloway makes clear here is that video games themselves are ontologically actions before the player’s own control and actions are even considered. Barthes own statements on the structuralist activity even somewhat resemble Galloway’s statements about video games, as Barthes claims, “structuralism is essentially an activity”.<sup>24</sup> In relation to my earlier comments about control and identification, viewing video games as actions also makes these processes

much clearer. Literal control in a video game is an active process as the player manipulates a controller or a mouse and keyboard, but the sensation of control and identification video games produce is itself active. The player's inputs and decisions change how they can control the game and the ways in which they can identify with their character according to a game's procedural narrative construction. Also of the utmost importance to my arguments about procedural identification is how Galloway clarifies his statement that video games are actions by stating, "the operator and the machine play the video game together".<sup>25</sup> Though it would be overly deterministic to say that the software's role is as important as the player's, it is absolutely true that the creation of all meaning in a video games rests in the interaction between the software and the player.

This, then, is why video games are capable of transforming identification into a procedure that is structured by their underlying ontology as software. Unlike in a tabletop RPG where the player has near complete control of their character's creation and human agency is always present in any action, whether in the form of the player or the gamemaster, vRPGs fundamentally change the relationship between player and player character by locating so much of the game's meaning in the procedurality of the code itself. Though tabletop RPGs are typically broken up into discreet sessions and those sessions into other discreet moments of diegetic action, there is a great degree of slippage between the fictional world of the game and the world of the players.<sup>26</sup> Because of their programmatic nature, vRPGs are much more strict in their discreet moments for character development and identification. Though the player may still develop a history for the character in their head, there is practically no way for this to be reflected in the game itself. Their identification with the character is always structured around the game's discreet moments meant for development and identification.

This is demonstrated at the beginning with my example from *The Witcher 3* where I am given the strict choice between a sympathetic answer and a callous, greedy one. As a player, I have little interpretive control over this decision. I did not come up with the dialogue itself as I could earlier in my *Dungeons & Dragons* session. Instead, the power I have is one of construction, both the construction of Geralt's personality and my identification with him. In addition to this, the power and control that the player is given in scenarios such as these is often absolutely. The software's response to the choice of dialogue options is entirely a result of that action. In a tabletop RPG, there is often a great deal of room for misinterpretation or other slippages in the individual player's feelings of control because of their collaborative nature. Because video games are entirely the result of the interaction between the player and the game's software, the player can take all of the game's outputs as the result of their own input. This control can often lead to an increased and closer sense of identification as the player develops an understanding of the control they possess over the game's space and thus their ability to control both it and their character.

Up to this point, the players of vRPGs have received little attention. Though I believe the programmatic elements of video games have immense power to shape the player's experience, players themselves do obviously have a role in creating meaning in a video game. Even though that experience is structured by the game's software, it would be wrong to say that the software determines it completely. Though Chun focuses on computation and software more generally in *Programmed Visions*, what she does have to say games specifically is illuminating with regards to the player's role in the meaning making process. According to her, "when we play a game, we arguably try to reverse engineer its algorithm or at the very least link its actions to its programming."<sup>27</sup> This reverse engineering is also closely tied to another element of video games



that separates them from other, older mediums: the inclusion of player failure and their complex web of diegetic layers. Galloway calls the “game over” screen “the most emblematic nondiegetic machine act”.<sup>28</sup> Galloway defines nondiegetic machine acts in general as, “actions performed by the machine and integral to the entire experience of the game but not contained within a narrow conception of the world of gameplay.”<sup>29</sup> What occurs after the game over screen is one of the most obvious acts of reverse engineering that a player can experience while playing a video game because they are typically the result of some sort of failure on the player’s part. The immediate reaction of the player is typically to try and discern what caused them to fail. Unconsciously, then, the player is reverse engineering the algorithm and structuring their future play around the game’s programmatic elements in order to succeed.

However, death and the “game over” screen are not the only possible failures in a video game and particularly in a vRPG. Like their tabletop predecessors, vRPGs typically allow players to make decisions that affect the player character’s personality and identity, the characters around them and the story of the game itself. This is again why RPGs are key to this project. They allow the player to actually take part in the game’s procedural narrative construction, which means the player has more power over the algorithmic elements of the game itself than most other genres allow. Again the switch from gamemaster to software is incredibly important here because it means that, though the player is making decisions, the algorithm of the game is determining the outcome of those decisions in ways that are frequently obscured from the player. The only way to change these decisions after the fact is to load a save from before they were made and try again. The level of complexity involved in changing the outcome of a particular decision can vary immensely.

In his book on video games and player character identification, *My Avatar, My Self*, Zach Waggoner describes a moment early on in the 2002 Bethesda vRPG *Morrowind* where the player is presented with the option of returning a ring found near the beginning of the game to the widower whose wife it belonged to. If the player chooses to give the ring back, they receive the widower's thanks and a large boost to his approval, which the game internally tracks as a discretely numbered rating. For many NPCs in *Morrowind*, a higher approval rating can lead to gameplay benefits like new side quests or extra item rewards. However, Waggoner usefully notes that this particular NPC has no impact on the game whatsoever making this reward ludicrously useless. On the other hand, if the player keeps the ring they can sell it and receive a boost to their in-game currency early on.<sup>30</sup> Again, much of the meaning making power of a video game lies in interpretation and construction. In this instance, the player must decide if the gold they get for selling the ring outweighs the widower's approval which, as already mentioned, has absolutely zero gameplay value. Though Waggoner uses this as an example of how players identify with player characters and apply their non-virtual<sup>31</sup> morality, the simplicity of the decision and the ease of reversing it by loading an earlier save and likely losing only a few minutes of gameplay mean that its status as an identificatory moment should be called into question. If the player were unhappy with the reward for giving the ring back, they would likely only lose a few minutes of gameplay in the process of reversing it.

This, then, reveals two vital aspects of procedural identification. First, unlike in a tabletop RPG, the player has the power to effectively go back in time and change their identification with the player character. Because decisions made in vRPGs are often tied to some sort of immediate, non-narrative reward, as the *Morrowind* example demonstrates, players might choose to forego identification in order to obtain the reward the game offers. Indeed, what this example can

usefully show is that the identificatory in video games is a matter of ebb and flow. The player can easily choose to opt out of identifying with their character in the moment if they are offered some other sort of reward. The challenge for video games, then, becomes building towards a consistent identification between the player and player character despite these ebbs and flows and the ability of the player to opt out. Waggoner incidentally discovers an example of this when his subjects both loot the bodies of enemies they killed in the game.<sup>32</sup> Though he finds this disconcerting given that ordinary morality would dictate that one should not steal from a dead body, it seems fairly apparent in this and many other cases that the immediate, ludic rewards offered in games quite easily overpower the identificatory process.

The power to change identificatory moments in the first place and the frequent conflict between identification and ludic reward or advantage would seem to make identification in vRPGs a tricky prospect at best and an impossible one at worst. For all the power the software has in shaping the game, players would still ultimately seem to have the power over their own identification. In a tabletop RPG, the power the player has over creating their character combined with the impossibility of reversing decisions would seem to at least encourage identification in a way vRPGs are incapable of matching. vRPGs are, in essence, the opposite because they allow much more limited control over the character creation process while also allowing the player to go back in time and change their decisions and identificatory moments. However, just as some of the unique affordances of a vRPG would seem to undercut their identificatory potential, a different set of affordances has the ability to make this potential significantly stronger than their tabletop counterparts.

When writing on interfaces, Alexander Galloway notes how they are an effect rather than a thing or object.<sup>33</sup> This is obviously reminiscent of his comment on how video games are

actions and, indeed, video games perfectly fit into his theories on interfaces. Though interfaces do not necessarily have to be software, most of *The Interface Effect* is dedicated to establishing a basic ontology of software interfaces such as video games. One of the more interesting things he has to say with regard to this is that “code must be compiled, interpreted, parsed and otherwise driven into hiding by still larger globs of code”.<sup>34</sup> The “globs of code” Galloway refers to here presumably become larger and larger the closer to the surface of the interface the user gets, and in his definition they are always hiding the smaller ones underneath them from the user’s view. In relation to video games, this begins to explain how they can hide their procedurality from players. The code is actively driving itself into hiding even as the player interacts with it.

A return to Chun is necessary here because of her intense focus on the ways software is purposefully designed to obfuscate both itself and its functioning. Writing on programmability, she says that it “also means that one’s computer constantly acts in ways beyond one’s control.”<sup>35</sup> Earlier on during one of the brief sections of the book where she explicitly discusses video games she states that, “because an interface is programmed, most users treat coincidence as meaningful.”<sup>36</sup> This statement, taken with the comment above from Galloway, can be taken together to explain how procedural identification works in video games and why it has the potential to be more powerful than other, more traditional identificatory processes.

Programmability causes software, video games included, to function beyond our control and without our notice. Though video games are, on the surface, a powerfully interactive medium their layers of programmability means that the precise ways they function both with and without player interaction cannot and are never meant to be understood by the player. Furthermore, the procedurality inherent to video games combined with the impossibility of understanding how

that procedurality functions means that the player is forced to take every event, no matter how small, as a direct and intentional result of their control.

Of course, as previously mentioned, the software of the game is always working in the background, altering the player character and the world of the game in ways the player cannot see, understand, or sometimes even control. This is precisely what makes procedural identification a process that takes place between the player and the game. The player takes action on the game, but the game has the capacity to take action on the player in ways other media do not. The procedural narrative construction featured in video games is, essentially collaborative. As the player takes action and makes decisions, the game's code operates behind the scenes to produce outcomes and consequences that procedurally guide the player towards future decisions. Furthermore, the procedurality of video games and the procedurality inherent in many roleplaying games add a secondary layer of structure to an already structural activity. An important comment that Mackay makes late in his book on tabletop RPGs is that, "while players may choose to identify with characters in the story, the story itself exists independent of them."<sup>37</sup> Video games and vRPGs differ because they do not exist independently of the player. Though Galloway identifies the "ambiance act" as a sort of existence outside or absent of player interaction, this is still a static state where the game is essentially "waiting" for player input.<sup>38</sup>

The creation of meaning in a vRPG that allows the player to control their character's identity and the world as a whole rests somewhere in between the player and the software. The multiple outcomes of different player choices do not exist until the player makes those choices and the game's software determines the outcome. Though Galloway's distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic as well as player acts and machinic acts are useful, modern vRPGs prove these boundaries to be more porous than when *Gaming* was written in 2006. Modern

vRPGs often allow the player to make hundreds of decisions over the course of the game, both small and large. Almost all of the decisions will have some sort of consequence or outcome at some point in the game, whether it is immediate or hours later in the game's narrative. As a result, the narrative of a modern vRPG is a complex mixture of overlapping player and machine actions rather than a clearly delineated graph as Galloway presents it. The machine and the player are constantly acting on one another as the process of identification and the creation of meaning take place.

As my writing so far has likely indicated, I do not believe all vRPGs take full advantage of the power of procedural identification. Procedural identification is, on its own, a complex process that takes place between the player and the software of the game sometimes without the player even knowing it. This, then, is the final and most important element of procedural identification: the game must establish its world and the characters around the player character then delay consequences for decisions the player makes. By delaying the consequences of the player's decision and rendering them unable to delineate how they arrived at any particular moment of narrative importance, the player has little choice in the moment but to make decisions based on their procedurally developing identification with the player character. Though the malleable nature of video game narratives and the ever-present ability to simply load a previous save means that the player always technically has the choice to force themselves out of a sutured identification and change their decisions, weaving individual decisions together and then delaying their ultimate consequences until much later in the game effectively prevents the player from fully understanding which decision they would need to change if they were even willing to lose hours of progress in the first place. Finally, some more recent series have delayed

consequences of certain decisions made in one game until the next meaning that dozens of hours of progress would be lost, rendering it unfeasible for the player to change their decisions at all.

The first chapter of this thesis will thus primarily trace the history of tabletop roleplaying games, their influences on vRPGs, the unique affordances of both and, finally, begin to explain how procedural identification actually functions. This chapter will help delineate where vRPGs and tabletop RPGs overlap as well as the myriad ways in which they differ. The transition from tabletop to video game console or computer was not natural or inevitable and along the way many aspects that should be considered inherent to tabletop RPGs were left behind. In some cases, these qualities had to be abandoned because some formal aspects of an inherently public, collaborative experience could not be ported over to an often private and singular one. In some other cases, the software aspect of video games allowed certain things like dice rolls and their interpretation by the gamemaster to be left by the wayside in favor of hiding these moments of proceduralism and narrative construction from the player in order to make it unclear precisely how their actions were impacting the world of the game.

The second chapter and third chapters both begin with two more brief real-play journals meant to introduce the games that feature centrally in each.<sup>39</sup> These journals are also meant to provide a more in-depth sense of what actually playing a game like *Mass Effect 3* or *The Witcher 3* is like in part because both are rather unique experiences with specific qualities that will inform the analysis that follows. The second chapter will then follow from the first by examining how BioWare's 2012 game *Mass Effect 3* takes full advantage of the algorithmic nature of video games and procedural identification. First, the *Mass Effect* series has a gamefied morality system that programmatically defines its world and protagonist. Furthermore, the *Mass Effect* series is often lauded for its protagonist and the degree to which player choice impacts its

overarching narrative. The *Mass Effect* series frequently denies the player full control over their character and uses layers of programmatic abstraction in the gameplay itself to deny the player full control even when they are making decisions. The series also tends to give players equal in-game rewards for quests and instead rewards decision-making narratively in ways that are often obscured. Finally, the fact that *Mass Effect 3* is the last in a trilogy is no coincidence because, when looked at as a series, the full consequences for certain decisions are sometimes delayed from an earlier game to the third installment to make it entirely impossible to predict the outcome of certain decisions in the moment or to reverse them when the consequences they set in motion come to fruition.

The third chapter will shift focus to CD Projekt Red's 2015 game *The Witcher 3* and broaden the scope of this thesis to a different kind of identification. Though procedural identification is still present in *The Witcher 3*, and indeed in practically any vRPG, games can still create and maintain a sense of identification between the player and the player character outside of procedurally constructed narrative moments. Often, simply playing a game, experiencing a world, and expressing control both over that world and the player character are identificatory experiences in their own right. This chapter will rely on Rehak's "Playing at Being" as well as older film-centric theories of psychoanalytic identification and its relationship to spectatorship and control in order to argue that these, too, can suture the player to their player character. However, procedurality and the programmatic nature of games will still feature heavily in this chapter again thanks to the film-based theories of identification provided by Rehak and other older writers like Christian Metz. Because the player's control of the character is never absolute or perfect due to the programmed nature of the game's interface, this character always exists somewhere outside of the player even in the most ideal moments of identification.



However, this sense of separation can be as productive and is indeed central to the Lacanian mirror stage and the theory of identification it gave rise to. This last chapter will consider how procedurality and identification are always present and subtly guiding the player's actions even when there is not a narrative being constructed.

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## INTRODUCTION NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In “The Definition of Play, The Classification of Games” Roger Caillois goes further and argues that mimicry itself can be seen in other vertebrates like sheep and dogs and even in insects. Though games as a ruled activity are unique to humans, the impulse to mimic others can be traced back evolutionarily to non-human animals. At any rate, role-playing itself and as a game is an ancient activity.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Caillois, “The Definition of Play, The Classification of Games.” Excerpted from *The Game Designer Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology* eds. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 136-137.

<sup>3</sup> My usage of “vRPG” is borrowed from Zach Waggoner coining the abbreviation in his book *My Avatar, My Self*, though he stylizes it as v-RPG.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the tabletop RPG I am currently playing with a group of friends, *Blades in the Dark*, has a 96 page long instruction and rules manual. Though some of this is given over to a description of the game’s setting, most of it is dominated by explanations of the game’s various rules and mechanics.

<sup>5</sup> For some examples of this see Bob Rehak’s “Playing at Being” (2003), Adrienne Shaw’s *Gaming at the Edge* (2015), Sam Maggs’ “Why BioWare’s games inspire a unique kind of fandom” (2015), or Zach Waggoner’s *My Avatar, My Self* (2009).

<sup>6</sup> Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), ix.

<sup>7</sup> Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 152.

<sup>8</sup> Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 35.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Books, 2001), 65.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>11</sup> The performative aspect of tabletop gaming is central to Mackay’s book. It is my belief this performative aspect is largely absent from vRPGs because they are typically played alone and instead tend to suture the player into identification with a character that is typically partially created already as opposed to the spheres of group performance and freedom allowed in character creation that defines tabletop gaming.

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<sup>12</sup> Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2014), 64.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>15</sup> For more on this, see Galloway's *Gaming* 39-69.

<sup>16</sup> Bob Rehak, "Playing At Being," in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2003), 4-5.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, 94.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 126.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>22</sup> Though all of Chun's *Programmed Visions* deals with the ways software obfuscates and empowers, the second chapter, "Daemoniac Interfaces, Empowering Obfuscations" handles this issue most directly.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Galloway, *Gaming Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>24</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Structural Activity" in *Critical Essays* trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1972), 213-220.

<sup>25</sup> Galloway, *Gaming*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Mackay analyzes the different spheres of roleplaying games in chapter two of his book, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*. Drawing on Richard Schechner's performance analysis, he names drama, script, theater and performance as the four primary spheres of roleplaying games.

<sup>27</sup> Wendy Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 53

<sup>28</sup> Galloway, *Gaming*, 28

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 28.

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<sup>30</sup> Zach Waggoner, *My Avatar, My Self: Identity in Video Role-Playing Games*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 87.

<sup>31</sup> Waggoner uses virtual/non-virtual and avoids the “virtual/real life” dichotomy often seen in writing on video games to reflect the fact that, for players, experiences in video games can often feel as real as anything else in their lives. As an avid player of video games, I have chosen to adopt this terminology and will continue to use it over the course of this thesis.

<sup>32</sup> Waggoner, *My Avatar, My Self*, 82.

<sup>33</sup> Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2012), 33.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>35</sup> Chun, *Programmed Visions*, 91.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>37</sup> Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, 126.

<sup>38</sup> To see a more in-depth discussion of the ambiance act, see Galloway’s *Gaming*, pg. 11.

<sup>39</sup> I have borrowed the term “real-play journal” from tabletop RPGs where real-play journals are narrativized accounts of tabletop RPGs games. Typically, these are meant to read much like a fictional book. My two journals also include brief establishing introductions outside of the world of the game to better contextualize them as single-player, programmatic experiences.

## Chapter 1. Role-Playing and Its Many Forms: The Shift From Tabletops to Video Games

Although role-playing as an activity has its roots in human pre-history, role-playing games of both the tabletop and video game variety have a distinct history of their own that is mostly devoid of role-playing until the last few decades. To understand how we arrived at fantasy role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, the long lineage of wargaming that stretches back to chess should be traced. Jon Peterson's 2012 book *Playing At The World* is one of the most exhaustive histories of tabletop roleplaying and its various lineages. The rules, pieces and gridded boards of chess were borrowed from heavily during the creation of *kriegsspiel*, or wargames.<sup>40</sup> Much of Peterson's history of tabletop gaming is centered around Georg Leopold and Georg Heinrich Rudolf von Reisswitz, a father and son pair of Prussian army officers, created the first rules for wargames, *Instructions for the Representation of Tactical Maneuvers under the Guise of a Wargame*, in 1812. As the name might indicate, wargames were originally meant as training tools for military commanders. The typical wargame consisted of a gridded game board scaled down at a specific scale from a real world location or environment along with unit counters to represent troop formations. The unit counters at this stage were simple rectangular pieces of metal, though later games would sometimes substitute them for more realistic human figurines.<sup>41</sup>

Though wargames of sorts existed prior to the von Reisswitz, their set of rules included two interventions that remain staples in tabletop RPGs to this day: an umpire and dice.<sup>42</sup> The younger von Reisswitz described the umpire as having "the task of providing a neutral and interesting scenario which will allow for either side to gain its objective."<sup>43</sup> This bears a rather obvious, nearly identical resemblance to the gamemaster (GM) in modern day tabletop RPGs.<sup>44</sup> Like the GM, the umpire was responsible for creating a scenario for the game to take place in

and ensuring fair enforcement of the game's rules. The second intervention, dice, was added because, in von Reiswitz's own words, "if... we were to give fixed results for fire effect we would arrive at a very unnatural situation... Only when the player has some sort of uncertainty over results... can we be confident that the *kriegsspiel* will give a helpful insight into maneuvering on the field."<sup>45</sup> In other words, adding in a layer of uncertainty and chance not only made the *kriegsspiel* more realistic, but also rendered it a more productive training tool. Furthermore, the mere introduction of dice added a layer of procedurality to *kriegsspiel* that would be carried over to tabletop RPGs and vRPGs. However, one notable difference is that the procedurality of dice is inherently random. Though it is still a ruled structuring of the game's content, video game procedurality is unique in that it prescribes specific, preprogrammed outcomes.

However, even with von Reiswitz's introduction of dice and an umpire or GM, it would still be close to a century until *kriegsspiel* finally morphed into *Dungeons & Dragons*. Though some recognized early on that *kriegsspiel* could be an appealing leisure activity for civilians, it remained the province of the military and small groups of hobbyists for well over a century.<sup>46</sup> One of the earliest commercial board wargames was Avalon Hill's *Tactics*, released in 1954.<sup>47</sup> Avalon Hill followed the relative success of *Tactics* with *Gettysburg* in 1958. *Gettysburg* sold 140,000 copies by 1963 and alongside the publication of the *Avalon Hill General*, a periodical designed to promote Avalon Hill products and wargames in general, wargames became a hobby with a notable following by the mid 1960s.<sup>48</sup> However, board wargaming was not the only form of wargaming around at the time. Concurrently but separately, miniature wargaming also had a small but dedicated following. Unlike board wargaming, which, as the name suggests, was played on a board divided up by squares or hexagons into quantifiable units much like the

*kriegsspiel* of the von Reisswitz, miniature wargames were played on large and realistic recreations of historically famous terrain with miniature figures representing troop formations.<sup>49</sup>



Figure 1: Example of the miniature wargame *Age of Eagles* featuring a restaging of the Battle of Wagram. Like many wargames this is a recreation of one of Napoleon's campaigns.<sup>50</sup>

Though these figures were still abstracted stand-ins for large numbers of troops, they were now unmistakably human. This transition from abstracted shapes on a gridded board to human figures and realistic terrain was, at the time, simply a difference in taste or style. Some preferred the more accurate and tactical combat reproduction of board wargaming while others enjoyed recreating or reinterpreting historical battles and the craftsmanship involved in making miniature wargaming figures and environments. However, this takes on significantly more

meaning in light of the transition from wargaming to tabletop roleplaying games like *Dungeons & Dragons*. The individually recognizable human figures in miniature wargaming eventually allowed players to atomize the perspective of these games down to the individual characters involved. Over time, these individuals were given unique abilities and characteristics as well as the ability to gain experience as they completed more and more battles. Eventually, this leads to the player characters featured in tabletop RPGs and vRPGs and is thus one of the primary movements from wargaming to tabletop role-playing that is responsible for the latter becoming a powerfully identificatory medium. In miniature wargaming, however, these individuals were typically high ranking military officers.<sup>51</sup> Though not all miniature wargaming systems used experience or individual officers at all, both constituted one of the most important shifts that was soon to happen in the transition from historical miniature wargaming to tabletop RPGs.

In addition to the shift from large-scale battles to individual player characters, the shift from historical settings to fantasy and science fiction settings that dominate tabletop RPGs should also be explained briefly. As the name of Avalon Hill's games and the name of the hobby itself likely indicate, wargaming was first and foremost dedicated to recreating historical battles. The shift to *Dungeons & Dragons* style fantasy settings has its roots in the 1971 medieval wargame *Chainmail* created by Gary Gygax and Jeff Perren.<sup>52</sup> This rule set included a supplement that allowed players to "refight the epic struggles related by J.R.R. Tolkien, Robert E. Howard, and other fantasy writers".<sup>53</sup> Although this supplement initially received poor critical reception, it quickly caught on in the broader miniature wargaming community. It also brought together Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, the two men who would eventually go on to create *Dungeons & Dragons*. According to Jon Peterson, the "catalyst for the initial collaboration of Gygax and Arneson was the publication by Gygax of a *Diplomacy* variant called "Napoleonic



Diplomacy II” in the August, 1969 [sic]”.<sup>54</sup> However, even *Chainmail’s* fantasy rules supplement was still dedicated to large-scale battles.

Peterson also traces the conclusive jump from battles fought between massive, historical armies to players controlling individual characters and traversing loot filled fantasy dungeons came first from Dave Arneson. According to Erik Mona, “the spark of genius came from... rules for dungeon exploration in which each player represented a single character.”<sup>55</sup> Arneson first applied these rules to a campaign he called *Blackmoor*, where, according to Peterson, “the protagonists... turned out to be the players of the Napoleonic Simulation campaign themselves, who, in the conceit of the game, played their own persons as if they had fallen into some sort of time-warp or portal.”<sup>56</sup> The details of this campaign made their way to Gygax via the *Domesday Book*, the periodical for his Castle & Crusade Society. The Castle & Crusade Society was an early miniature wargaming group started by Gygax and several others, with Arneson joining shortly thereafter. This society is notable because it published maps and reports of miniature wargaming campaigns and began to lay the groundwork for real-play journals that were published after or alongside tabletop RPG campaigns. These early real-play journals were absolutely vital to the success of both wargaming and fantasy tabletop RPGs. They allowed fans of both hobbies to find one another through advertisements for new campaigns or requests for fellow players and sometimes even conduct entire campaigns through the mail. Furthermore, by fictionalizing campaigns and spreading these accounts, particularly talented or inventive players like Arneson could essentially teach others how to write and play their own fantasy RPGs. Arneson and Gygax themselves first met in person in 1972 and shortly thereafter began writing and play testing the rules for what would eventually become *Dungeons & Dragons*.<sup>57</sup>

Though Gygax wrote the original rules for *Dungeons & Dragons* to at least be approachable by novices to wargaming, they still made the “assumption that the audience is already familiar with wargaming terms like ‘referee’ and ‘campaign’.”<sup>58</sup> Though the referee/GM role has been explained, the importance of a “campaign” both to *Dungeons & Dragons* and to practically every subsequent roleplaying game has not. The idea of a campaign did not originate with *Dungeons & Dragons* or even Arneson’s previously mentioned *Blackmoor*. Campaigns originally appeared in wargaming where they were meant to have a “long time scale... players’ orders might take months of game time to implement.”<sup>59</sup> Rather than recreating discrete battles over the course of a day or a weekend, campaigns were meant to recreate entire wars and often took place over the course of months or even years in some extreme cases. As with the Castle & Crusade Society, campaigns were in part about networking players of wargames across the extreme distances that separated them. Wargaming conventions and local clubs were suitable for players who could attend them or could find other players locally, but many players found themselves the only wargaming enthusiast for miles around. The campaign lengthened the amount of time one had to commit to wargaming, but it also allowed spatially disparate players to engage with one another.

Because of Arneson’s *Blackmoor* campaign and the eventual creation of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the campaign is also absolutely vital to *Dungeons & Dragons* and to the possibility of identification in roleplaying games as a whole. Though they were initially a way to recreate entire wars, in the fantasy role-playing game context campaigns are what allow players to role-play as the same character over a series of discrete sessions, develop that character’s statistics and build a consistent but constantly growing and evolving personality through a series of decisions and narrative events. The previously mentioned example of officers gaining experience

for winning battles in miniature wargaming is an excellent early example of this. Even in the miniature wargaming campaign, players desired a sense of both consistency and advancement. They wanted in-game rewards for their time commitment and their own skill at commanding their troops. Though these were primarily statistical in wargaming, tabletop RPGs saw these rewards and advancements become tied to identity and identification because they often open up new avenues for identification to take place.

For instance, all classes in *Dungeons & Dragons* have a set of specializations. Though the player can easily choose these based on statistics, these background are also given “flavor” by the game’s handbook and allow the player to role-play their character in new or different ways. To give an example of this, the warlock class gains their magic power from otherworldly or mystical forces that can include demons, Lovecraftian elder gods or “fey” royalty that are akin to benevolent gods of nature. Though each source of power confers different statistics and abilities, each also offers entirely unique and vastly different ways to role-play. Additionally, campaigns do still serve the purpose of drawing together spatially disparate players. The *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign I am currently engaged in involves players living all over the state of Texas, though today we are fortunate enough to be able to communicate in real time through voice conferencing rather than having to correspond through mail as some players in the 70s did.

The campaign is also part of the reason why role-playing games both of the tabletop and video game variety form the backbone of this study. Without a campaign, role-playing games would be discrete, singular sessions where a player could create or might simply be given a character that would exist for that session alone with no promise of character development or continuity. Though many changes, advancements and refinements were made to RPGs during the

decades following the release of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the campaign aspect has remained core to practically every RPG of any variety because it is what allows players to use the medium to tell stories, create characters, and develop an identificatory relationship with them. However, not every RPG maintains the paired narrative and character development elements of tabletop and vRPGs that the campaign provides. Massive multiplayer online RPGs (MMORPGs or MMOs) are clear descendants of tabletop RPGs in many ways. They often directly port or at least heavily borrow the statistics and settings of tabletop RPGs and, for the most part, they are fundamentally social and collaborative experiences.

However, they also tend to lack clear or interactive narratives and player character development beyond simply raising statistics and leveling up. Though many MMOs do feature narratives, they are often located outside of the game in other media such as books or movies or created within the game by players themselves on specialized role-playing servers. According to Greg Costikyan, “MMOs are almost *devoid* of story. That’s because there are “never-ending” games: story ultimately depends on change, and players cannot be permitted to make real and meaningful changes to the game world.”<sup>60</sup> Without the ability to make any sort of meaningful impact on the world of the game through a sense of choice or procedural decisions making, the sort of procedural identification based off of narrative decisions cannot really exist. Here, Costikyan is also referring to the inherently repetitive nature of dungeons in MMOs. Like tabletop RPGs, MMOs feature dungeons that groups of players traverse while killing monsters, gaining experience, and finding loot.

However, in MMOs these dungeons can be repeated an infinite number of times so that the player can earn experience and gear for them more than once. This is a process typically referred to as “grinding” and it forms the backbone of the ability for MMOs to offer the

technically “never-ending” experience that Costikyan mentions. However, as he notes, the side effect of this is that dungeons in MMOs can also never truly have narrative consequences the way they can in tabletop RPGs. For example, in my most recent *Dungeons & Dragons* session, my party went through a dungeon that ended with us fighting and killing a high-level cultist who we had been investigating for several previous sessions. In an MMO, this sort of important narrative event would have to take place somewhere outside of a dungeon because the dungeon itself would not be repeatable if the entire narrative justification for exploring it was removed the first time it was completed.

Similarly, though live action role-playing (or LARPing) has a dedicated following, it tends to emphasize the performative side of RPGs by typically requiring players to come dressed in costume to act out their character much more literally than they do in a tabletop RPG. Furthermore, though LARPing groups could potentially be as small as two people, they are often made up of well over a dozen. Though there are by no means restrictions on the size of a party in a tabletop RPG, most groups settle in the range of 4-8 players including the GM. A group of over a dozen players in a tabletop RPG would likely move through the game at an incredibly slow pace because of the sheer amount of time spent on out-of-character mechanical questions or plans as well as on combat in-character. LARPing is far more accommodating to large groups because players can and often do fight one another rather than GM created and controlled enemies. Anders Tychsen et. al. note how this and other qualities such as “lack of a tight, narrative control” connects LARPing more to MMOs than to traditional tabletop RPGs.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, one other important side effect of the sheer number of players in a LARP game or campaign is that each individual player’s control over the narrative is reduced. This is also part of the reason why tabletop RPGs tend to include a much smaller number of players. Since they are primarily a

narrative and character driven medium, players tend to prefer having more impact on that narrative and their character. Because LARPing much more heavily emphasizes the performative aspects of RPGs, players are willing to accept a lessened control over narrative in order to play and perform their character in real-life.

### **RPGS AND/AS PERFORMANCE**

Though LARPing emphasizes performativity in a much more theatrical sense, this should not be taken as a claim that tabletop RPGs lack an element of performativity. At this point, it would be useful to examine the performative qualities of tabletop RPGs, how they have or have not ported over to vRPGs and how this impacts identification in both mediums. Over the course of Fine's research on tabletop RPGs, he discovered that "within the game, one does not portray one's "real self". However... people play personae by transforming their "real self." Yet the fact that one acts the part of a dwarf or gnome provides sufficient self distance that players believe that they have transcended the constraining features of their selves."<sup>62</sup> In *Gaming At The Edge*, Adrienne Shaw also discusses performativity in video game character creation based off of Judith Butler's seminal work on gender performativity. In Shaw's own words, this means that gender is

"Produced in particular social contexts to serve different purposes and reliant upon cultural recognition for coherence. We are not, however, free to perform gender in any way we wish. There are norms that structure the enactment of gender and make it intelligible; performing one's gender otherwise runs the risk of not being recognized and having one's body and identity rendered... potentially unviable."<sup>63</sup>

The particularly important element here as it relates to the sort of performativity in tabletop RPGs is Shaw's remarks about intelligibility. The fantastic or futuristic settings of those games

potentially make a much broader set of identities legible. Furthermore, the fictional layer of these games can even make unintelligible identities possible, desirable and even productive narratively. For example, while hashing out character creation before starting a new *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign, a friend mentioned that he wished to play a robot bounty hunter transported through time and space to the campaign's fantasy setting. Though this identity was technically unintelligible in the fictional world this campaign took place in, he envisioned his character as the comedic relief because of the inevitable misunderstandings that would arise between him, the rest of the players and the non-player characters the GM wrote.

Recall that Arneson's *Blackmoor* campaign featured the real-world players of a Napoleonic wargame being transported through time and space to a medieval fantasy setting. For the players, this was likely far more interesting on both the narrative level and the character development level because it would have encouraged the creativity to imagine how a real, modern day person would navigate a medieval fantasy world. Daniel Mackay also emphasizes the theatricality of tabletop RPG performance by saying that role-players "are also their own spectators and witnesses to the characters' theater of actions".<sup>64</sup> Although Shaw and Butler's conception of performativity is undoubtedly valuable when studying games and culture as a whole, the sort of performativity found in tabletop RPGs is far more overt and intentionally theatrical. In addition to this, the fact that these performances are typically taking place in a fantasy or science fiction universe has the potential to allow players to perform roles and identities they are unable to outside the boundaries of the game. Mackay even goes so far as to describe tabletop RPGs as emancipation from a "postmodern experience of fragmentation and disunity... a self-conscious and self-knowing pursuit for a sense of unity in the lives of the role-players".<sup>65</sup> Though this may be somewhat utopic, it does speak to the capabilities tabletop RPGs

have to offer a world where the players can imagine themselves as something different and perform a role they may not identify with or even recognize.

However, Fine also states “players must identify with their characters in order for the game to be a success”.<sup>66</sup> Interestingly, Fine only briefly defines identification itself as “ways in which [players] can come to know their character.”<sup>67</sup> This is a rather curious definition considering that tabletop RPG characters are almost entirely created by the player, at least originally. The player, then, should ostensibly have a complete understanding of their character. What Fine’s definition of identification reveals is the way that the player’s control of their own character can and often is taken away by the collaborative nature of a tabletop RPG. In a vRPG, everything can be seen as the result of the player’s input. Though the game can operate in ways the player does not understand or expect, every input from the player is met by an output from the game. This degree of control is one of the primary reasons why vRPGs are so important to this study, they offer a world where the player’s decisions are always impactful and always reflected in some way by the game’s procedurality. Though a player may be responsible for their character’s initial creation, once introduced to the game world, the GM and the other players one quickly loses that singular, authoritative control. Every player character becomes collaborative over time because no single player in the group can claim complete ownership of due to the way other players and their choices as well as the GM’s decisions and interpretations of dice rolls subtly shift characters away from what their players might have intended.

If we return to Adrienne Shaw’s definition of identification, “a process by which we come to feel an affective connection with a character on the basis of seeing that character as separate and yet a part of us in some way” it is not initially clear how her focus on video games has effected her conception of identification.<sup>68</sup> This definition is much the same as the version of



the Lacanian mirror stage that Rehak describes in “Playing at Being” where identification functions based off of both recognition and misrecognition. However, Shaw further clarifies this definition with two comments that begin to make clear what changes when we shift from tabletop RPGs to vRPGs. She first states that, “separating identification *with* from identification *as* demonstrates that people are able to connect with characters in a multitude of ways” and then that her interviewees claimed that, “identifying with experiences was the main way [they] connected with characters across their media consumption.”<sup>69</sup> This emphasis on experience is particularly important to video games and vRPGs because of the experiential aspects of play. Play, even the abstracted play of a video game, allows the player to experience an incredible range of different ways of being and the fact that Shaw’s interviewees identified through shared experiences of some sort thus follows quite naturally.

#### **AGENCY AND IDENTIFICATION IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES**

Few, if any, scholars writing on tabletop RPGs make this same distinction between identifying with and identifying as. Though the frame analysis of Fine’s work does set up different levels of identification or immersion, both Fine and McKay identify the fact that these frames are porous boundaries that the player navigates subconsciously as they perform their character and discuss the game’s mechanics as well as real life with their fellow players. Since single-player vRPGs lack these social and performative elements, this distinction becomes much sharper. Though most scholars of tabletop RPGs mention how identification with the tabletop RPG character requires seeing that character as both a part of and separate from oneself, this is essentially the Lacanian version of identification with no further specification added as in Shaw’s case. By making this distinction, Shaw complicates the relationship video game players have with their characters. This complication is necessary, however, because video game players

practically never have the open ended control over character creation that is afforded to tabletop RPG players. The amount of control offered to players while creating their character varies wildly from franchise to franchise. The *Mass Effect* series, for example, possesses a fairly robust character creation system that allows the player to select from one of three backgrounds that potentially set the stage for their character's personality development. *The Witcher 3*, meanwhile, does not offer character creation at all as its protagonist, Geralt of Rivia, is borrowed from a series of books written by Polish fantasy author Andrzej Sapkowski. In the games, Geralt retains the appearance and personality that Sapkowski describes in the books and the player has no ability to change these when starting the game.

This limited control over the character creation process, when it is offered at all, leads to how Shaw's interviewees identify with video game characters through experiences. Without the ability to create a character out of their own imagination that can be fully realized in the world of a game, video game players are instead left with the actions they take in game as instances where they are capable of identifying with their character. Interestingly, this exact process seems to be mirrored in reverse in tabletop RPGs. Though a player can have near-limitless creativity while creating a character's personality or imagining how they look, the performativity and collaboration inherent to the medium also allows the player to distance themselves from their "role" and the story as a whole. From interviewing his players, Fine discovers that, "You must not become too involved in protecting your character... Some players are so concerned about their characters that they neglect to do those things important to the success of the party as a whole".<sup>70</sup> The collaborative nature and open-endedness of tabletop RPGs can actually make identification harmful to the overall quality of the game if one player becomes so attached that they feel unable to put their character in danger or take risks while playing. Unlike in video

games, player character deaths can and do occur diegetically. This is in large part because of the flexibility of tabletop RPG narratives. Though the GM may write loose plot threads and characters, the players are free to explore the world as they wish and thus there are real punishments for failure if the players make poor decisions or try to advance through the narrative too quickly. When this happens, the player typically creates a new character and reenters the game. Tabletop RPG characters are under real threat of dying and a player who goes out of their way to keep their character alive can be detrimental to the rest of the group.

This mirrored process of identification between tabletop RPGs and vRPGs speaks to one of the largest and most important differences between them that has thus far gone unmentioned: agency. In *Hamlet On The Holodeck*, Janet Murray simply defines agency as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices.”<sup>71</sup> She clarifies this by offering a lengthy metaphor about dancing which she concludes by stating that “when things are going right on the computer, we can be both the dancer and the caller of the dance. This is the feeling of agency.”<sup>72</sup> In other words, digital environments have the potential to offer, or at least appear to offer, a world in which the user’s agency is absolute. Unlike the collaborative form of agency found in tabletop RPG narrative, digital narratives offer the user or player a world where their agency can be perfectly reflected. The tabletop RPG player’s agency is ultimately always constrained by their fellow players and the GM. The limitless freedom of character creation quickly turns into an open-ended but ambiguous sort of agency once the game actually begins. Digital environments such as games can and do remember every choice the player has made and are typically programmed to reflect these choices back to reinforce the player’s agency in the game world. Tabletop RPG players could not possibly remember every single action taken by the rest of the group and, over time, subtly change each player’s character

into an intricately woven tapestry of ideas, traits, and actions that no one player can claim sole ownership of.

Although Murray sees enormous potential in the agentic and narrative possibilities of digital environments, they cannot possibly be as open to the user or player's imagination as a tabletop RPG. Murray acknowledges as much when she says, "interactors can only act within the possibilities that have been established by the writing and programming."<sup>73</sup> Digital narratives, and vRPGs by extension, fundamentally change the player's relationship to the text. In a tabletop RPG, the player operates as narrator, narratee, character, and often much more. Murray's definition of agency still includes a fairly traditional relationship between digital author and "interactor" largely based off of the relationship between author and reader. Interactors, as the term suggests, can interact with the narrative and change its structure but are not the authors of the content itself. However, one of the greatest tools of digital narratives is their ability to offer multiple paths with which the user or player can traverse the narrative.

Though Murray does not touch on this aspect of digital narratives as much, she does state "the procedural author creates not just a set of scenes but a world of narrative possibilities."<sup>74</sup> Espen Aarseth's seminal work *Cybertext* and its usage of the labyrinth concept can help uncover some of the latent possibilities of digital narratives that Murray is referring to. Aarseth describes the labyrinth narrative as one in which "the reader can explore at will, get lost, discover secret paths, play around, follow the rules, and so on."<sup>75</sup> He goes on to refer to these sorts of texts as "cybertexts" and clarifies that the reader "is not safe, and therefore... she is not a reader." Indeed, as vRPGs should demonstrate, the player is not a reader at all. They actively participate in constructing the narrative that unfolds as they play the game.

Even still, as Murray indicates, the player or interactor is distinct from the author in a digital narrative unlike the tabletop RPG player who does sometimes act as an author. To understand how video games and vRPGs in particular can still create a powerful sense of identification and agency despite the player's relative lack of freedom, it is necessary to delve more deeply into their programmatic and procedural aspects. In their article focusing on the programmatic aspects of video games and agency, Wardrip-Fruin et. al. offer a new definition of agency as “a phenomenon, involving both the game and the player, that occurs when the actions players desire are among those they can take *as supported by an underlying computational model*. [emphasis original]”<sup>76</sup> Unlike tabletop RPGs, vRPGs are capable of responding and reacting to players in real time. The rules of a tabletop RPG are essentially static and though the GM serves much the same role as the software and programmatic elements, the GM also lacks the ability to instantly respond in a specifically programmed manner. They explain the pleasure of this form of agency by stating

“To create the phenomenon... in relation to a fictional world it is necessary to suggest dramatically probable events, make material affordances available for taking those actions, and provide underlying system support for both the interpretation of those actions and the perceivable system response to those actions”.<sup>77</sup>

This helps make clear how vRPGs are distinct and unique with regards to both the pleasure and identification they create relative to tabletop RPGs. Though the GM of a tabletop RPG can suggest events and make affordance for those actions, they have no real way of providing support for the interpretation of events. vRPGs are unique in their ability to not just make certain

events possible, but also to programmatically suggest how these events should be interpreted and thus build towards a consistent sense of identification.

This also does a great deal to help explain why experiences were the main points of identification for Shaw's interviewees. The choices a player makes alongside the narrative events that happen as a result of these choices are the primary way the player can express agency in a vRPG. Though the player technically has agency with regards to other aspects of the game such as combat and exploration, these choices typically lead to the same end or only change the surface experience of the game rather than its primary narrative or character development components. For example, in a series such as *Mass Effect*, the player can choose from a wide range of weapons during combat and is mostly free to explore the dozens of planets in the game at will. However, all the weapons in the game have the same basic effect of killing enemies and the vast majority of planets are simply mined for resources or, at most, offer short side missions with no impact on the main story or the player's character. Though the player is technically expressing agency in these moments, that agency is rather shallow and ultimately impacts the game very little.

The narrative decisions the player makes, on the other hand, sometimes restructure the entire narrative and lead to a drastically different outcome. Even small decisions sometimes compound and become incredibly important later on in the game. This speaks to the vRPG's programmatic ability to "remember" and reflect the player's agency. These decisions and experiences lead to identification over time because they are the primary way the player can influence and express agency over the game world. In a tabletop RPG, the player is almost constantly able to impact the game in some way, but this agency can be difficult to see reflected. Even though the player's overall level of freedom is restricted in a vRPG, the freedom and

agency the player does have is consistently and constantly shown in the world of the game because practically every action on the part of the game's software is the result of an action the player took.

Wardrip-Fruin et. al.'s definition of agency also recalls my earlier usage of Wendy Chun's claim that "because an interface is programmed, most users treat coincidence as meaningful."<sup>78</sup> Though Chun is referring to the player treating every coincidence from the interface as meaningful, the player must treat every single action they take as meaningful because the interface is programmed to respond to it. Though some actions on both ends of the relationship between game and player are bound to be coincidental, the programmed interface slowly conditions the player to accept its actions as intentional and the player's actions as meaningful. If not for this layer of programmed intentionality, the pleasure and even basic experience of interacting with a programmed interface would fall apart. Chun later underscores her own point by saying that "real-time processes... make the user the 'source' of the action".<sup>79</sup> This helps explain precisely why the real-time aspect of vRPGs is so important when compared to the relatively slow pace of a tabletop RPG. Because feedback appears to be instantaneous in a vRPG, the player can more easily understand their decisions or actions as having lead to a particular outcome in the game.

The seemingly complete level of control offered to the player by vRPGs makes the player character an almost ideal subject for identification. In his psychoanalytic essay on video game avatars and identification, Bob Rehak states that, "the split subject goes through life alienated from itself and its needs, endlessly seeking in external resources the "lost object" (*objet petit a*) from which it was initially severed- an object that 'derives its value from it identification with some missing component of the subject's self'".<sup>80</sup> In the vRPG, the player can become a subject

whose agency is perceived to be nearly perfect and absolute. Though the entire range of choices offered to the player may be more limited relative to a tabletop RPG, the choices that are offered are immediately and inevitably reflected back at the player in some way by the game's programmatic software. In *My Avatar, My Self*, Zach Waggoner draws on feminist scholar Diana Fuss' claim that "identification is the physical mechanism that produces self-recognition... the detour through the other that defines a self" to conclude that "identification and desire for Fuss cannot be extricated from each other."<sup>81</sup> Though this combination of identification and desire can and often does appear in a player's identification with their tabletop RPG character, vRPG characters can fulfill a far more basic desire because of the software's ability to reflect the importance and impact of the player character's every action.

#### **FRAMES, DISTANCE AND MORALITY**

Indeed, much of what makes RPGs unique is the relationship between player and character. In his study of tabletop RPG players, Dennis Waskul states that, "neat distinctions between person, player and persona become messy... many role-players claim that effective play presumes gamers who identify with and otherwise apprehend their fantasy personas as extensions of themselves."<sup>82</sup> This quite deliberately recalls the frame analysis Fine performs on tabletop RPGs in his seminal book *Shared Fantasy*. Fine works off of Erving Goffman's definition of a frame as, "a situational definition constructed in accord with organizing principles that govern both the events themselves and participants' experiences of these events."<sup>83</sup> According to Fine, there are three basic frames in an RPG: the "real world" that the players inhabit, the context of the game where the players must deal with and discuss mechanics and rules, and finally the fictional world of the game itself where the player characters exist.<sup>84</sup>



The most surprising thing Fine discovered in his study is that players typically have little trouble navigating these frames. He states that, “frame switching typically poses no substantial problem for participants.”<sup>85</sup> Though he borrows the frame terminology from Goffman, due to Mackay’s work and my own experience it might be more productive to think of these “frames” as porous layers that players often move between unconsciously. Within the space of mere seconds, a player could use “I” to refer to their real-world self, go on to discuss the mechanics of the game or an upcoming dice roll, and then switch to speaking as their character in first person as they make a decision or choose a course of action. At no point in this sequence of events does the player need to announce that a frame switch is occurring or that a momentary suture with the player character is occurring, it simply happens as a natural part of the tabletop RPG process. To return to Daniel Mackay, his treatment of tabletop RPGs as both a narrative and performative medium adds another way to understand how their framed nature impacts how they produce identification. According to Mackay, “while players may choose to identify with characters in the story, the story itself exists independent of them, separated by the distance the role provides.”<sup>86</sup> Mackay’s focus on narrative is not coincidental and should not be ignored when trying to delineate one of the major differences between tabletop RPGs and vRPGs as well as how and why they produce identification. At the beginning of his book, Mackay defines tabletop RPGs as “an episodic and participatory story-*creation* system [emphasis mine]”.<sup>87</sup> The continued importance of the campaign is seen in his use of “episodic” and all the connotations of continuity and development that come along with it, but his focus on story creation is something new.

If we return to the introduction for one of the earlier versions of *Dungeons & Dragons*, in this case the 1977 revised basic set, one can see that although the possibility for storytelling and story creation was latent, it was not necessarily Gygax and Arneson’s main focus. In this version

of the game, players were instructed to “[create] a character or characters... the characters are then plunged into an adventure... as the players engage in game after game their characters grow in power and ability”.<sup>88</sup> From this, one can discern that they were more interested in the process of leveling up a character and the power fantasy that might arise from creating and controlling a mighty hero. This is not surprising considering the *Dungeons & Dragons* has its roots in the fantasy literature of J.R.R. Tolkien and Robert E. Howard.<sup>89</sup> The progression of the intrepid hero to the all-powerful superhero through a process of killing ever more powerful monsters and gaining experience points that would allow a character to level up was, originally, the point of the game. However, tabletop RPGs have undoubtedly become a medium more dedicated to telling stories and developing character personalities instead of a set of statistics.

Although tabletop RPGs do have rules of varying stringencies and even a layer of proceduralism thanks to the way dice are used, they are not truly procedural the way video games are. To return to Murray, proceduralism means, “writing the rules by which the texts appear as well as writing the texts themselves.”<sup>90</sup> Later she answers the question of how to create rich procedurally generated stories by saying, “we would have to find some way to allow [authors] to write procedurally; to anticipate all the twists of the kaleidoscope, all the actions of the interactor.”<sup>91</sup> This is not how tabletop RPG narratives are created, however. Murray’s notion of procedurally generated narratives is still a fairly traditional one where there is a clear boundary between author and reader, or “interactor”. She defines this relationship by comparing it to choreography where the author, “supplies the rhythms, the context and the set of steps that will be performed. The interactor... makes use of the repertoire of possible steps and rhythms to improvise a particular dance among the many, many possible dances the author has enabled.”<sup>92</sup> Murray’s interactor is more piecing together a pre-written narrative than creating something

entirely on their own. Though the pieces may technically be arranged in any order, the content of the pieces remains the same.

This author/interactor relationship that Murray describes has little in common with the relationship between the tabletop RPG's relationship between GM and players. While writing on the way narratives in tabletop RPGs are created, Jennifer Cover remarks that "while the DM [dungeon master] may act as narrator, this is not the only role that the DM fulfills within the gaming session... no single perspective can account for the multiple layers of the game. A narratological stance would analyze the DM as narrator, but might not provide a framework for the DM as world build or rule enforcer."<sup>93</sup> Though this seems to approach Murray's notion of how procedural authorship provides the rules by which a text is read as well as the text itself, the nuances of a tabletop RPG show this to not be the case. Though the GM does indeed roll dice and enforces the game's rules, this is almost always done through a narrativized valence. For example, in most systems a dice roll of 1-3 indicates a poor outcome, 4-5 indicates a good outcome and 6 indicates a critical role or perfect outcome. However, it is entirely up to the GM to narrativize this dice roll in the world of the game. These explanations quite frequently take into account the personality traits of the character or characters whose actions have initiated a roll in order to tailor the outcome to that character and create a richer, more collaborative narrative.

To give a brief example of how all of this plays out, in the tabletop RPG *Blades in the Dark* that I have been playing with a group of friends my character, Simon, is an often clumsy alcoholic. However, Simon also has the best statistics for sneaking out of any of the player characters in the group. As a result, I often play Simon as begrudging, cantankerous and lazy when my fellow players have decided that stealth is required for an upcoming mission. Like most

tabletop RPGs, *Blades in the Dark* requires players to roll whenever their character undertakes any sort of major action such as sneaking or fighting. Most RPGs also have numerical statistics that correlate to the actions the player character can take. Higher numbers in individual statistics give the player a better chance of a high dice roll and thus a positive outcome. However, low rolls can and do still happen. In one instance, Simon was sneaking around a mansion owned by a wealthy but suspicious merchant. Although my initial roll to bypass the guard posted at the front door was high, a subsequent one while sneaking down a hallway was low. At this point, it was up to the GM to creatively (or uncreatively) interpret and explain why Simon had suddenly failed at something he was supposed to be skilled at. Keeping Simon's personality and chosen vice in mind, the GM explained that Simon had drunk too much before the mission, lost his focus on the surroundings, and accidentally tripped over a loose floorboard.

Small though this example may be, tabletop RPG narratives and character developments are built off of the accumulation of hundreds of instances like this over the course of a campaign. This also demonstrates why the narrative of a tabletop RPG is not truly procedural. Neither the player nor the GM are entirely responsible for creating the content of this event or assembling it. It took the collective work of the entire group to get Simon to walk down and eventually stumble in that hallway. Although things like dice rolls and statistics determine the positivity or negativity of outcomes as well as the likelihood of success, they rarely if ever dictate the actions, content, or characters' personalities. Mackay supports this notion when he states that, "class- or skill-based RPGs like *AD&D* [*Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*]... only qualify elements that are secondary to the story, leaving the primary elements of theme, meaning, and character development unbound by the rules."<sup>94</sup> As all of this should demonstrate, tabletop RPGs are an enormously complex story-creation and storytelling medium that is ultimately open-ended and

collaborative despite an underlying layer of procedurality that dictates mechanical aspects of the game.

The complexity and inherent collaboration of narrative construction in tabletop RPGs naturally leads to some difficulty when trying to define how and why they produce identification between the player and player character. According to Waskul, “each player, who exists in the real world, must become more identified with the character he plays... so that the boundary between the two worlds is more blended.”<sup>95</sup> This again recalls Fine’s frame analysis and, in this instance, Waskul posits identification as necessary in order to make the transition between frames as seamless as possible. Mackay initially follows a similar line of argument, but also complicates Waskul’s conclusion. Early in the book Mackay says, “players, through identification with their characters, are freed from their social bonds.”<sup>96</sup> Later on, however, he also states “identity is both diegetic and nondiegetic. It includes both the social identity of the player, and the fictional identity of the player-character.”<sup>97</sup> Rather than being in direct conflict with one another, these two statements instead reveal that players are never entirely freed from their social bonds or entirely unconstrained by the framed nature of tabletop RPGs.

vRPGs, on the other hand, almost entirely lack this sort of performative aspect. To briefly return to my earlier example from *Blades in the Dark*, a similar scenario playing out in a vRPG would likely have no way to reflect my character’s vices. Instead of Simon being a clumsy alcoholic, he might have been exposed because I personally did a poor job sneaking by moving too quickly or stepping out of the shadows and into the light of a lamp. The player is never asked to pretend as if they are the character they are playing and oftentimes the game has no way to reflect their character’s personality back at them outside of narrative moments.. Often, this leads to players playing a character much more like themselves than they might in a tabletop RPG.

After a session with one of her interviewees, Shaw remarks on this phenomenon by saying that “We went back and forth between nice and mean choices... we both used the research context as an excuse to explore optional ‘badness’ that we would not have taken normally in our own game play.”<sup>98</sup> In other words, both Shaw and her interviewee require the detached, explorative research settings to make “bad” choices at all.

Interestingly, Shaw also remarks that “the games [he] played were offline and, thus, his choices were viewable only to himself and me in the interview, other interviewees felt that their actions in online games more directly reflected the kind of people they were, and thus, they were less comfortable ‘being bad’ in public.”<sup>99</sup> The “online games” Shaw is referring to here are MMOs, which, as mentioned earlier, do sometimes carry over the performative aspects of tabletop RPGs. In both MMOs and tabletop RPGs, the performative elements more easily allow the player to perform as a character they may not identify with at all. Waggoner and many other scholars term this “disidentification” and Waggoner once again draws on Fuss to define it as “an individual’s willful choice to experience division rather than merger”.<sup>100</sup> Sometimes, players express this by deliberately playing characters that are evil or amoral. The formal qualities of a tabletop RPG quite naturally allow this because player are entirely free to revel in the fun of performing a character entirely different from themselves and because of how the framed layers of the game allow the player to distance themselves from the negative or even potentially harmful aspects of playing an evil character. Though Shaw remarks that players are even less comfortable with this sort of behavior in MMOs, this is largely because “evil” behavior can often have a negative impact on other players. In a tabletop RPG, this is far less likely to happen because the only consequences are narrative and not on the played aspects of the game.

Because players in tabletop RPGs in particular are allowed and often encouraged to play as nearly anything they want, they are freer to conceive of characters vastly different from themselves.<sup>101</sup> In vRPGs, players are always constrained by the options presented to them by the game. While the player of a tabletop RPG is essentially a co-author of both their character and the narrative as a whole, players of vRPGs are more assembling pre-written personality characteristics and narrative events through the game's procedural systems. As a result, players are not nearly as free to conceive of a character different from themselves because the game has no way of knowing the player's personality or identity. Thus, players must take the options in front of them and either make decisions that are the most consistent with their own identity or construct a character that is separate from their own identity but consistent within the game's internal procedural narrative construction.

However, this becomes far more complicated in vRPGs both because of the reduced opportunity for performativity and because of their programmatic nature. Because of the profoundly moral nature of this concept, Shaw names it "moral clarification" and defines it based off of Stuart Hall's version of identification as "[requiring] active processing of difference and sameness of individual's recognition of aspects of themselves within or absent from the text. Identity, if not identification, becomes relevant if the player feels uncomfortable, or comfortable, choosing to be 'bad'."<sup>102</sup> In vRPGs, morality is often strictly codified on the programmatic level. Many vRPGs feature a points based morality system where specific decisions or actions are considered "good" or "evil" and points are added or deducted from the player's overall "score" based off of these decisions. This is a level of legibility completely absent from real life and even from tabletop RPGs. As a result, vRPGs are capable of directly telling the player whether they are being good or evil whereas a tabletop RPG allows for more ambiguity. Furthermore, much of

the pleasure of performing a moral ambiguous or outright evil character in a tabletop RPG is taken away in vRPGs because there are sometimes harsh penalties from the game itself and often negative reactions from other characters in the game if a player decides to make decisions the game decides are evil.

As an example, in the *Mass Effect* series the good and evil paradigm is referred to as “paragon” and “renegade”. A great deal of the series’ narrative comes from recruiting non-player characters to join the player character’s group and then taking them on missions and side quests. However, certain “renegade” decisions will cause group members to leave, often never to return. The same is not true of “paragon” decisions. Though some members of the group may disagree with the player’s altruism, they never leave the group as a result. Even in MMOs, players can be punished for “evil” behavior by being suspended or even banned if they are harming other players’ experience of the game. A tabletop RPG, on the other hand, has no gamified or programmatic way to punish a player for performing their character as evil. This is in essence what Shaw is referring to with her concept of “moral clarification”. Morality in video games and vRPGs tends to be hyper-visible and thus eminently clear to the player. Often the player has little if any ability to interpret or dispute the game’s version of morality, it is simply a given quantity. As a result, players are encouraged to go down the moral path they personally identify with far more than they would be in a tabletop RPG.

As should be apparent now, vRPGs and tabletop RPGs have a great deal in common but are also remarkably different because of the material and formal affordances of their respective mediums. Though both grew out of wargaming and still retain elements of procedurality to differing degrees, tabletop RPGs are fundamentally a medium of performance and narratives creativity. Players are under no expectation or obligation to play a character they identify with or



have anything in common with at all. The performative and narrative valence of tabletop RPGs frees the player from their own identity and often the material boundaries of the real world. Though identification may be necessary in part for a fully successful role-player, this sort of identification may be more an understanding or knowledge of some aspect of the character's personality or background.

Despite the apparent restrictions placed on the player by vRPGs, they can be just as powerful of an identificatory medium because of their programmatic nature. This comes through both in the sort of agency they allow and produce as well as through their lack of a framed structure and theatrical performativity. By giving the player an avatar whose agency is almost always legible, direct, and immediately consequential players are much more capable of identifying with their characters on the basis of experiences and decisions rather than just on personality. The fact that these moments are procedurally constructed by the player and then embedded procedurally within the game's narratives gives the player an inherent structure and expectation of agency that is consistently fulfilled by the game. By also removing much of the player's ability to openly perform as their character and by often strictly coding legible morality into the game, vRPGs also encourage a closer level of identification because much of the pleasure of performing a fictional role has been removed. Now that many of the formal qualities of role-playing games and the unique capabilities of vRPGs have been established, my next chapter will explore in-depth how the procedural narrative construction of vRPGs actually constructs identification through an analysis of a thread of quests throughout the *Mass Effect* series.

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## CHAPTER 1 NOTES

<sup>40</sup> Jon Peterson, *Playing at the World*, (San Diego: Unreason Press, 2012), 204.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 228.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 229.

<sup>43</sup> Georg Heinrich Rudolf Johann von Reiszitz, *Anleitung zur Darstellung militärischer Manöver mit dem Apparat des Kriegs-Spieles*, trans. Bill Leeson (Self-Published, 1989), 22.

<sup>44</sup> Though “dungeonmaster” is the more traditional term, tabletop RPGs frequently take place outside of dungeons and fantasy settings entirely. I prefer the term “gamemaster” because it is more inclusive of a broader range of games.

<sup>45</sup> Reiszitz, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Peterson, *Playing at the World* 283.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>50</sup> *Military Miniatures: Magazine for Collectors of Figures and Vehicles in 1:72 Scale. Age of Eagles: Battle of Wagram*. Web. Germany: IDL Software. <http://www.miniatures.de/wargames.html>

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 344.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>53</sup> Gary Gygax and Jeff Perren, *Chainmail*, (Evansville, IN: Guidon Games, 1971), 33.

<sup>54</sup> Peterson, *Playing at the World*, 50.

<sup>55</sup> Erik Mona, “From the Basement to the Basic Set: The Early Years of *Dungeons & Dragons*”, *Second Person*, eds. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 2007), 26.

<sup>56</sup> Peterson, *Playing at the World*, 66.

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- <sup>57</sup> Ibid, 26.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid, 27.
- <sup>59</sup> Peterson, *Playing at the World*, 50.
- <sup>60</sup> Greg Costikyan, "Games, Storytelling and Breaking the String", *Second Person*, 9.
- <sup>61</sup> Anders Tychsen et. al. "Live Action Role-Playing Games: Control, Communication, Storytelling and MMORPG Similarities", *Games and Culture* Vol 1 no. 3 (2006), 253.
- <sup>62</sup> Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 56.
- <sup>63</sup> Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 188.
- <sup>64</sup> Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, 118.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid, 116.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid, 214.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid, 217.
- <sup>68</sup> Shaw, *Gaming At The Edge* 94.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid, 94.
- <sup>70</sup> Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, 222.
- <sup>71</sup> Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 126.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid, 128.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid, 152.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid, 153.
- <sup>75</sup> Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), 3.
- <sup>76</sup> Noah Wardrip-Fruin, Michael Mateas, Steven Down, and Serdar Sali, "Agency Reconsidered" *Breaking New Ground*, 7.
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid, 4.

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- <sup>78</sup> Wendy Chun, *Programmed Visions*, 53.
- <sup>79</sup> Ibid, 89.
- <sup>80</sup> Bob Rehak, "Playing at Being", 4 and Kaja Silverman *The Subject of Semiotics*, 126
- <sup>81</sup> Zach Waggoner, *My Avatar Myself*, 26 and Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference*, (New York: Routledge, 1989), 2.
- <sup>82</sup> Dennis Waskul, "The Role-Playing Game and the Game of Role-Playing", *Gaming As Culture*, eds. J. Patrick Williams et. al., (McFarland Books: Jefferson, NC, 2006), 31.
- <sup>83</sup> Fine, *Shared Fantasy* 181.
- <sup>84</sup> Ibid, 186.
- <sup>85</sup> Ibid, 196.
- <sup>86</sup> Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, 126.
- <sup>87</sup> Ibid, 4.
- <sup>88</sup> Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set* (1-7<sup>th</sup> printing), ed. J. Eric Holmes, (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Inc., 1977), 5.
- <sup>89</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of the fantasy literature roots of *Dungeons & Dragons*, see chapter 2 of Peterson's *Playing at the World*.
- <sup>90</sup> Murray *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 152.
- <sup>91</sup> Ibid, 185.
- <sup>92</sup> Ibid, 153.
- <sup>93</sup> Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 85-86.
- <sup>94</sup> Mackay, 47.
- <sup>95</sup> Waskul, 39.
- <sup>96</sup> Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, 28.
- <sup>97</sup> Ibid, 48.

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<sup>98</sup> Shaw, *Gaming At The Edge*, 121.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 121.

<sup>100</sup> Waggoner, *My Avatar, My Self*, 26.

<sup>101</sup> The constraints placed on player creativity in tabletop RPGs typically comes down to the GM. GMs can be restrictive or permissive as they want while designing a campaign. The GM for my current *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign, for example, is very permissive and allowed us to create characters of practically any race and even allowed me to use a homemade class that does not appear in nor is officially supported by the official rules of the game.

<sup>102</sup> Shaw, *Gaming At The Edge*, 119-120.

## **Chapter 2. Delayed consequences and immediate identification in the *Mass Effect* Series**

I sit down on my couch at home, it is later in the evening and I feel reasonably pleased with the amount of work I got done earlier in the day. I know I am nearing the end of this play through of *Mass Effect 3*, and thus the entire series. I decided to play the *Mass Effect* trilogy all the way through one final time before the release of *Mass Effect: Andromeda* in March as a way to revisit these characters and places that have meant so much to me before embarking on a new adventure. I turn on my PS3 and start the game up, hearing the familiar theme that accompanies the game's main menu, framed in the background by a subtly animated image of earth being bombarded by what look like meteorites. Rather than being loud or orchestral, this theme is quiet and pensive. It serves to underscore the fact that that, despite the backdrop of galactic war, *Mass Effect* is ultimately about the personal moments the player finds within this chaos. After the game loads, I take control of Commander Shepard, guide her towards the mission control panel, and select Priority: Rannoch to begin the reclamation of the planet..

After the initial shock wears off, Tali marvels at being one of the first of her species to set foot on her home planet of Rannoch after hundreds of years of exile. She can only experience it through the lenses and filters of her suit unlike Garrus and I, but all the same she is overwhelmed by the beauty and promise this world holds. More immediately pressing, however, is the danger it currently presents. The geth, the sentient AI that originally drove the quarians from Rannoch hundreds of years ago, are currently infesting the planet. We made sure to land in a clearing, but their patrols or drones could spot us at any moment. After Tali recovers enough to proceed, we sneak along a mountain ridge and quickly spot a small group of geth across a ravine. Hunkered down behind a rocky outcrop, I order both Tali and Garrus to overload the two smaller geth, knowing that this will paralyze them while I take aim at the larger unit. We strike with the

efficiency of a group that has been fighting side by side for years. The geth hardly have a chance to react before the smaller two crackle and chain bolts of electricity back and forth while the larger one loses a chunk of metal from the cowling covering its mechanical eye. Garrus directs his attention to the larger one and his sniper rifle rips a hole through the metal plating on its chest. As it drops to the ground, Garrus, more at home in battle than anywhere else, cheerily yells, “Scoped and dropped!”

I think back to when I first met both Garrus and Tali a few years ago on the Citadel, the capital of the multi-species galactic government that rules the Milky Way. Entering the Citadel for the first time gave me something of the sense of awe Tali felt upon seeing Rannoch. The hazy pink clouds of interstellar dust only part once your ship is practically close enough to dock. The Citadel itself is massive, far bigger than any installation I had ever seen. Its five metallic arms extend for miles and contain entire cities, and all that comes along with an enormous, pan-species city. Citadel Security, or C-Sec, is ostensibly responsible for keeping the Citadel’s residents in check, but their hands are often tied by the bureaucracy that comes along with dozens of alien governments. This was the world I found Garrus in, a junior C-Sec officer trying to do right in a world that would often prefer he do nothing. I first met him while he was imploring his superior to allow him to investigate the same dangerous but well-connected criminal I was looking for. Though he was denied, I took an immediate liking to Garrus and asked him to join up. In his voice I could hear the anger and resentment at a system that had held him back, and the desire to do what he thought was right no matter the cost and no matter the rules.

Finding Tali was a much different matter. With Garrus’ help, we got word of a quarian with information on the criminal we were tracking. However, Tali was about to fall into the

hands of a dangerous group of thugs that would sooner kill her and destroy her intel than buy it from her. We rushed to the location of the meeting just in time to see her throw her throw a grenade at two of them, blinding them and rendering their weapons useless. We quickly entered the fray and crouched down behind barricades while taking potshots at the leader of the group. He was dealt with shortly and I struck up conversation with Tali. She was, understandably, terrified and confused, the quiver in her voice coming through even with the modulation of her suit's voice filter. Like most quarians fresh on the pilgrimage that takes them away from their nomadic home fleet, Tali was nervous and on edge. But underneath that, I could sense her bravery and resolve. I quickly learned that she was an admiral's daughter and, as such, much more was expected out of her than out of an ordinary quarian. Now, here she was, one of the first of her kind to step foot on her home planet in hundreds of years on a mission to end the war that had driven them away in the first place.

The three of us had been through lifetimes of adventure in our few short years together. We share bonds and scars that go beyond mere words. I once talked Garrus down from murdering one of his former friends and convinced him that there was more gray in the world than he wished to believe. I consoled Tali the moment she found out her father died after conducting brutal experiments on the geth, and later helped her hide this from the other admirals in order to clear her and her father's name. Though it would be easy to treat their loyalty the way a commander treats their troops, Tali and Garrus were friends first and foremost and I did what I did out of my love for them. Seeing them now, standing on an alien home world, vastly different people than who they were when I met them, I felt a surge of pride for everything we had accomplished and steeled myself for the immense challenges I knew were yet to come.



## ***MASS EFFECT* AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF PROCEDURAL IDENTIFICATION**

Though the introduction and the first chapter provided a broad overview of role-playing and vRPGs, this chapter and the proceeding two will primarily be structured around in-depth analysis of individual games. This switch from top-down theorization to close analysis is necessary to show how the concept of procedural identification can be applied to actual video games. Furthermore, I have chosen to focus on a single game for each chapter because of the sheer length of many modern vRPGs. The *Mass Effect* trilogy, for example, can easily take well over 100 hours to complete and *The Witcher 3* on its own can take anywhere from 30-50 hours. Though I have focused in on more specific examples from both games, these quests still tie into the narrative and broader world of the games in ways that are sometimes inextricable. However, doing this sort of analysis on specific and often exemplary games is necessary in order to communicate how the aspects of procedural identification that I have established actually function in games. Trying to apply them broadly to vRPGs as an entire genre would be next to impossible and, furthermore, would likely be reductive in the ways it would miss the nuances of how procedural identification plays out in different ways in different games.

Indeed, the games that I have chosen to analyze in-depth have been chosen in part because they all represent different ways that procedural identification literally plays out. For this chapter, I have chosen to focus on the *Mass Effect* series by Canadian developer BioWare because of the complex way its intersecting plot lines through the three games in the original series result in a complex, procedurally constructed story how which in turn results in a powerful and similarly procedural identification. In the *Mass Effect* series, you play as Commander Shepard. One of the very first things the player does in *Mass Effect* is choose a background and class for Shepard as well as create their facial features.<sup>103104</sup> Much like in tabletop RPGs, the background options act as a basic starting point for Shepard's personality where they might have

been the child of two military officers or enslaved by raiders before the start of the series while class impacts the ways Shepard can be played during the game's combat sequences while also providing some light texture to their personality. This Shepard and the decisions the player makes carry over to each proceeding entry in the series, though the player is given the opportunity to change Shepard's class and facial features of the beginning of the second and third game. This detail is absolutely vital both to this chapter and to the series' popularity as a whole. In many game franchises, each new entry sees the introduction of a new character, a complete dismissal of the player's previous choices in favor of a single, predetermined set of them in order to lessen the workload of the game's developers and writers, or the lack of choices that can alter the game's world and narrative in the first place. In the *Mass Effect* series, even seemingly insignificant decisions carry over in order to make the player feel like their agency in the world has actual meaning and in order to make almost every play through of the series unique in some way.

Like many vRPGs, *Mass Effect* also features a strict, procedurally coded system of morality, likely a descendent of *Dungeons & Dragons*' alignment system.<sup>105</sup> *Mass Effect* defines player morality along a spectrum from "paragon" to "renegade". Certain narrative decisions the player makes are coded to give the player points that increase their score in one of these categories. Furthermore, these points are tallied separately rather than being a zero sum game unlike similar points based morality systems in other vRPGs.<sup>106</sup> Though the game uses "paragon" and "renegade" to avoid the good/evil dichotomy, paragon decisions are generally morally good and benevolent while renegade decisions are morally neutral at best and typically selfish and aggressive. In the first two games of the series, paragon and renegade points were awarded primarily for major narrative decisions. Furthermore, throughout the series, a high score

in either category could open up unique options for dialogue and even major narrative decisions later on in the game.

As a result, the player is heavily incentivized to play primarily as either a renegade or paragon Shepard. In basically any given situation where paragon or renegade decisions are offered there will only be one neutral alternative and this alternative never opens up more unique options later on in the game the way that paragon or renegade options can. Though this is never stated, it is one of the most important aspects of the procedural narrative construction and the procedural identification that results from it in the series. As my analysis later in this chapter will explain, the procedural narrative construction guides the player down a consistent identificatory path by opening and closing different narrative and dialogue options as a result of decisions the player makes throughout the series. Before getting into this analysis, however, it would be useful to briefly outline some of the game's major plot threads and the characters who are relevant to this analysis.

The series begins in the year 2183, a few decades after humans have discovered a means of faster-than-light travel. After making this discovery, they soon learn that they are not alone in the galaxy and that many other alien species have connected using the same system of FTL travel the humans found, which is based around highly advanced but ancient technology called the Mass Effect Relays. Humanity quickly learns that the rest of the alien races believe these relays were built and left behind by the Protheans, a species of aliens that predates any currently living in the Milky Way galaxy and that went extinct before any of the extant species discovered the Mass Relays. In the first *Mass Effect*, Shepard discovers that the Mass Relays were actually built by an ancient species of sentient machines that the Protheans referred to as the Reapers. The Reapers harvest the species of the Milky Way that have discovered the Mass Relays every

50,000 years. As the game goes on, they also learn that the Protheans sabotaged the primary Mass Relay, which was disguised as a massive space station called the Citadel, to slow their next invasion and give the next group of species to find the Mass Relays and the Citadel time to defeat the Reapers. The main villain of the first *Mass Effect* is attempting to repair the Citadel to lead the Reapers back through in the belief that they will spare him once their harvest begins. Shepard eventually stops him and destroys the vanguard of the coming Reaper invasion, but knows that a much larger threat still looms on the horizon as the Reapers draw closer and closer to the galaxy.

Another major part of the *Mass Effect* series is the characters the player meets along the way. Though the series is strictly single player, Commander Shepard is accompanied by multiple companions during missions and onboard their ship, the *Normandy*. The exact number of characters fluctuates from game to game, but a small group of 3-4 characters is present in all three. Most important of these to this chapter is Tali, a member of a species of aliens called the quarians. The quarians once had their own planet, called Rannoch, but were forced to evacuate it en masse about 200 years before the series begins because a race of machines they created as cheap slave labor, called the geth, gained sentience and turned against them. They have lived in the sterile environment of the flotilla of spaceships they used to evacuate ever since this event. Shepard meets Tali early on in the first *Mass Effect* when she tries to hand information about the game's villain over to a group of thugs in the Citadel, as described in my real-play journal. Shepard rescues her from what turns out to be an ambush and Tali then becomes one of the most prominent companions in all three games in the series.

Tali's presence throughout all three games is important as the *Mass Effect* series typically uses its major non-player characters as the main site for identification outside of its main

narrative. Two NPCs accompany Shepard on all of their missions and between mission Shepard is free to talk to these characters in order to get their commentary on events and to discover more of their backstory. These relationships are complex and, in the case of Tali and other returning characters, they develop over the course of all three games. The player has the ability to build a remarkably stable and consistent relationship with characters like Tali based on their narrative decisions and the way they treat them in private conversations. By choosing certain options typically aligned with the game's morality system, the player can procedurally reach unique relationships with these characters largely based off of their pre-existing identification with Shepard. Furthermore, the game's NPCs will typically take sides immediately before major narrative decisions and then either commend or reprimand Shepard based on the decisions they ultimately make, bringing them closer together or driving a wedge between them that can become permanent. Over time, characters will respond warmly to a Shepard who has been a good friend or will brush them off if Shepard has ignored their concerns or advice. This is one of the major ways the player's agency and identification with Shepard is reflected in the world of the game because of the sheer amount of time the player spends with the game's main cast of characters.

In *Mass Effect 3*, the player is tasked with uniting the Milky Way galaxy's various alien species in order to defeat the Reapers once and for all. A little over halfway through *Mass Effect 3*, the player is tasked with reclaiming Rannoch from the geth in order to secure support from the quarians. At this juncture, Tali enters the game for the first time and becomes a potential squadmate for Shepard once more after having been missing along with the other quarians for the first half of the game. Over the course of the first two games, much of her development has to do with her complicated duties to her people and her need to live up to her father's legacy as

an admiral in the quarian fleet as well as his career as a prominent scientist studying the geth. In *Mass Effect 3*, when the player is sent to Rannoch they know full well that they are being tasked with ending the war between the quarians and geth. Though these options are not explicitly presented when this quest is introduced, the player is made to understand that they will have to side with the quarians, the geth or, hardest of all, broker peace in a war that started when both races tried to commit genocide against one another.

However, the moment this quest gets started, decisions in previous games heavily impact it and the course it takes. At one point late in *Mass Effect 2*, Tali is recalled to the quarian fleet to stand trial for sending parts of geth she killed back to her father to study. Her father and the research vessel he was stationed on have gone silent and the rest of the fleet's admirals believe it is because her father reassembled the geth and was then killed by them along with the rest of the crew. Tali faces a treason charge and banishment from the fleet if she is convicted. Shepard goes along with her no matter how the player reacts to the charges leveled by the admirals. However, after the initial hearing, Shepard has the chance to speak to the three admirals individually to get their personal opinion on the situation. Though the player does not fully know it at the time, these conversations begin to lay the major groundwork for the decision they will have to make on Rannoch in *Mass Effect 3*. To quickly sketch these admirals and the perspective they offer to Shepard, Zaal'Koris is well liked amongst the quarian populace and believes the geth are best left alone because of all the wrongs the quarians have already inflicted on them. Han'Gerrel and Daro'Xen are both militaristic warhawks with Han'Gerrel supporting a full-scale invasion of Rannoch to wipe out the geth. Daro'Xen also wants to retake Rannoch as soon as possible, but also believes that the quarians should study and eventually re-enslave the geth once they reclaim their homeworld.

At the time in *Mass Effect 2*, Shepard takes these conversations as a sign that Tali's trial is actually political maneuvering on the part of the three admirals and, in fact, having these conversations later becomes necessary in securing the ideal outcome of her trial. Shepard and Tali then board the research vessel and discover that Tali's father was indeed reassembling and reactivating geth in order to run experiments on them. Tali is horrified and disgusted, but also begs Shepard to protect her father's name and not reveal his crimes to the admiralty board. Once they return to the trial, the player faces a number of decisions with numerous consequences for the plot of *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*. First and foremost, if the player rushes and foregoes the conversations with the three admirals then it is significantly harder to fully clear Tali's name as well as her father's. If the player did participate in these conversations and has a high paragon score by this point in the game, then Shepard can rally the crowd and accuse the admirals of using Tali's trial to manipulate the rest of the fleet politically. If the player's paragon score is too low, then this option is simply unavailable. The player can also present the evidence of Tali's father's crimes, but this leads to his posthumous exile and makes peace between the quarians and geth on Rannoch in *Mass Effect 3* impossible to achieve if the player makes the "wrong" decision in a different *Mass Effect 2* mission.<sup>107</sup> The player can also simply lie and say no evidence was found whatsoever, but this will lead to Tali's exile and the complete removal of peace between the quarians and geth in *Mass Effect 3* as an option in the first place.

In this mission there are four distinct outcomes, three of which require certain decisions to have been made at some earlier point in the game. If the player has been making primarily renegade decisions, for example, then they must speak to the admirals in order to clear Tali's name and set up certain outcomes in *Mass Effect 3* correctly. Though the player can assume to some degree the different decisions possible during the final trial from the setup before Shepard

and Tali board the research vessel, there is practically no way of knowing how to make all of them available. As a result, the player is put into a position where they must act out of genuine curiosity and out of their existing identification with Shepard and with Tali as well.

Sympathizing with her wish to protect her father's legacy is almost necessary to make peace in *Mass Effect 3* as even a renegade Shepard will turn the trial against the admirals to protect Tali. If the player is impatient or has no interest in talking to the admirals, then they will eventually find certain outcomes significantly harder to reach or even outright impossible. This is indicative of much of the *Mass Effect* series' approach to procedural identification. The player is frequently rewarded for exploring conversations fully and for undertaking side quests and is rewarded with the availability of more options in more important scenarios connected to the game's main story.

Once again, as opposed to tabletop RPGs, vRPGs are unique in their ability to code particular outcomes to particular webs of decisions. A single player's impact over a tabletop RPG can vary greatly even with little input from the GM. Furthermore, because tabletop RPGs are played out live and collaboratively, the story can often veer off in a particular direction with little to no input from the GM. On the other hand, everything in a vRPG is a result of the interactions taking place between the player and the procedurally constructed narrative. The story of a vRPG exists entirely within the game's code and is then constructed by the player's actions and decisions, removing all of the spontaneity of a tabletop RPG.

#### **THE PROCEDURAL NARRATIVE LABYRINTH AND THE IMPORTANCE OF DENIAL**

The *Mass Effect* series and the particular chain of quests surrounding Tali provides one of the best examples of procedural identification because of the incredibly complex web of events, decisions and outcomes that builds and influenced the mere appearance of narrative decisions later in the game. The player is constantly reminded of the possibilities available to them and



even of those that have been shut off because of the nature of the game's dialogue wheel.<sup>108109</sup>

The dialogue wheel itself is a feature of the *Mass Effect* series that is well worth commenting on. The wheel is broken down into six separate sections. Dialogue options on the right typically advance conversations while options on the left extend them by asking questions. The options on the right side of the wheel also correlate to the game's morality system with the top option being paragon, the middle neutral and the bottom renegade. However, during certain decisions the left side of the wheel is also used to display dialogue options that require a particularly high paragon or renegade score with the uppermost option again correlating to paragon and the bottom to renegade. Though this was originally included to make conversation in the series smoother and more cinematic, it also openly broadcasts the fact that there are paths the player will not or cannot take that might lead to vastly different outcomes. They know full well that they are seeing only one version of events and often know that earlier decisions may have either backed them into a corner or made more options available.

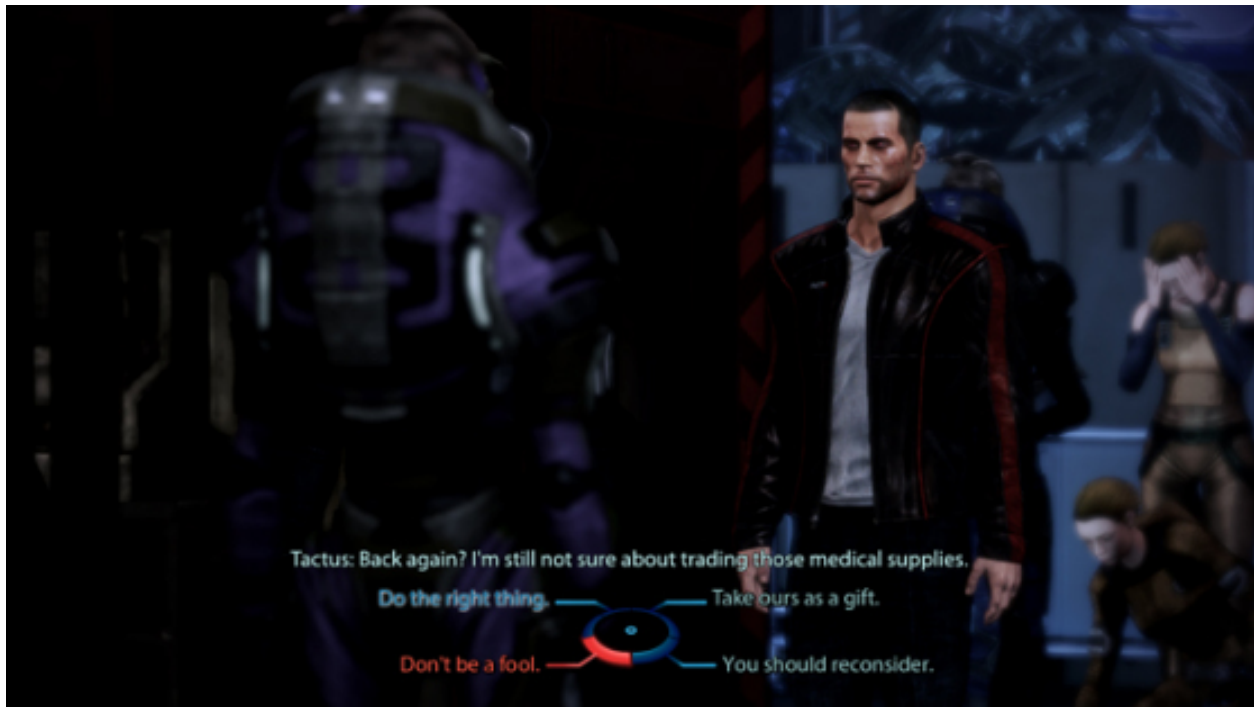


Figure 2: The dialogue wheel in *Mass Effect 3*<sup>110</sup>

However, there is never any indication in the moment of how certain decisions will open up options later on down the line. This is the one important, vital element of tabletop RPGs that vRPGs share and that I would argue is even more vital to vRPGs. Tabletop RPGs grow and change rather organically and often unpredictably. GMs write up characters with distinct personalities, motivations and beliefs as well as loose plot threads but these can and frequently do fall by the wayside. vRPG plots on the other hand do not grow organically, or even grow at all for that matter. They resemble the labyrinth mentioned by Espen Aarseth in *Cybertext* or Janet Murray's concept of procedural authorship from *Hamlet on the Holodeck* in that their plots consist of various narrative strands that the player constructs and activates but does not actually have any hand in creating.<sup>111</sup>

Denying the player knowledge of how certain decisions will construct this plot is then necessary because these outcomes are fixed and absolute. A GM in a tabletop RPG letting a bit

of plot information slip would certainly impact the decisions made by players as well as their experiences, but plot details in tabletop RPGs are also very rarely fixed. In a vRPG, on the other hand, giving the player information about how certain decisions will impact outcomes later in the game could potentially be disastrous for the identificatory possibilities open to the player. Players could very easily make decisions towards a desired outcome based off of either planning out future narrative events or in the hopes of some sort of reward. In his research with two subjects playing the 2002 vRPG *Morrowind* during *My Avatar, My Self*, Zach Waggoner somewhat unknowingly reveals this in the previously described situation where players can either return a dead woman's wedding ring to her husband or keep it for themselves. The outcome here is immediate and simple, the player is either thanked by the man or is allowed to sell the ring for what constitutes a decent amount of money very early in the game.<sup>112</sup> Though the player does not necessarily know what will happen based off of this conversation as they are having it, the immediacy and the simplicity of the outcome means that they can very easily reload an earlier save to revert their choice.

As time has gone on and game narratives have become more complex, fewer and fewer easily reversed scenarios like this are included in games. More often now, games have major narrative outcomes be the result of multiple decisions interacting in unique, procedural ways that are hidden from the player. Even if the player wanted to reverse their decision, they would not necessarily know how. In the *Mass Effect 2* example described earlier, the player would have no real way of knowing that talking to the admirals earlier would open up an entirely different set of options at the end of Tali's trial. More importantly, even though a renegade player would be aware of the fact that a particularly high paragon score could open up a new option the moment it is offered, they would be unable to achieve this score without restarting the game entirely which

would likely be too daunting a task given that Tali's trial only comes in the last third of the game's story. The *Mass Effect* series, then, sutures the player to Shepard's perspective by occasionally hinting at different outcomes but making it impossible for them to be achieved in addition to frequently obfuscating how the player arrived at the set of outcomes available to them through the game's procedural narrative construction. The plot of a series like *Mass Effect* is a procedural labyrinth with doors that open and close permanently based off of the paths that the player chooses. One decision at one point in the game may open a path hours later without the player ever even realizing it.

Though earlier games in the *Mass Effect* series feature this sort of procedural narrative construction and identification, the most refined example of this approach appears in the third installment of the *Mass Effect* series. Shepard meets the same three admirals who presided over Tali's trial in *Mass Effect 2* and has the chance to speak to them once more as they attempt to reclaim Rannoch from the geth. If the player had taken the chance to talk to them in *Mass Effect 2* as well then they will realize that the same political debate is still being hotly contested. Zaal'Koris is only going along with the invasion plans begrudgingly while subtly hinting that he would prefer to make peace, if possible, while Han'Gerrel and Daro'Xen are eagerly awaiting their chance to wipe out and re-enslave the geth respectively. However, if the player cleared Tali's name without incriminating her father in *Mass Effect 2* then she will also arrive as the most recently appointed admiral of the quarian fleet. Though she humbly treats this as a token position given to her because of the vacancy left by her father's death, it still gives her an immense amount of power and is necessary to open up the option to make peace between the quarians and geth on Rannoch.

Though the player is always offered a choice between the quarians and geth at the end of their quest on Rannoch, this third option to make peace has an incredibly complex web of requirements and interactions between earlier quests in order to become available, which reflects the momentousness of Shepard preventing the genocide of an entire species and allowing the quarians and geth to work together as equals. This actually harkens back to some of Ian Bogost's statements about procedural rhetoric and the ways in which video games can make arguments and reflect reality through procedurality.<sup>113</sup> The difficulty of brokering this peace and the effort required on Shepard's part is reflected by the effort required on the player's part to open up this ending in the first place. Furthermore, as has been mentioned previously, there is no indication at any point earlier in the game that certain decisions will open up this ending in the first place. The player may know that brokering peace is possible, but the choice is never presented at all unless all of the undisclosed, procedural requirements are met. As with the smaller, earlier example of Tali's trial, the player instead has to act in a way consistent with their interest in and identification with Shepard's character at multiple points through the narratives of *Mass Effect 2* and *3* in order to reach this option.

As mentioned earlier, the procedural construction towards this option on Rannoch actually begins with Tali's trial in *Mass Effect 2*. If Tali is found guilty, then the option to make peace between the geth and quarians never becomes available at all as Tali's moderate voice is not present amongst the admirals. Furthermore, another character and later addition to Shepard's team in *Mass Effect 2* must also be present. This character is an advanced geth unit who the team names Legion. When Shepard and their crew first find Legion, he had been damaged in battle and the player can either choose to activate him or send him away for experimentation. If the player does not activate Legion, then the option to make peace is completely impossible.

Furthermore, if the player starts *Mass Effect 3* fresh without importing a save from *Mass Effect 2* then by default Tali is exiled and Legion is not activated. Thus, the player must import a save from *Mass Effect 2* in the first place while also making having made these two critical decisions in order for the option to make peace be available at all. Though this can in part be looked at as a sort of narrative reward for long-term fans of the series, it is also by far the most desirable outcome for players who want their Shepard to be a heroic figure of epic proportions because reuniting the geth and quarians after hundreds of years of war is by far their most impressive accomplishment up to this point in the series.

As long as these basic conditions from *Mass Effect 2* are met, there is then another elaborate set of conditions that must be met in order to open up the peaceful option. The mission structure in *Mass Effect 3* is broken down such that major story missions are called “Priority” missions. However, these Priority missions are almost always accompanied by time-sensitive side quests which must be completed before the Priority mission or shortly after or else they expire and are considered failed, often with some sort of narrative consequence. Though the concept of time sensitive missions is not exactly new, *Mass Effect 3* uses them much more extensively and to much greater effect than most other games. This is precisely what Aarseth imagines in his conception of labyrinthine cybertexts.<sup>114</sup> The player knows full well the paths open to them but is free to choose whether or not to explore them. In most games, side quests never undertaken are much like doors never opened. Though the player knows something lies behind this door, it essentially does not exist at all in the game’s narrative if that door is left unopened. In *Mass Effect 3*, side quests are not some sort of inert substance patiently waiting for the player but instead living parts of a procedurally constructed narrative that can impact that narrative even without the player’s interaction. For example, during an earlier Priority mission

Shepard is tasked with disarming a massive bomb found under a planet's surface. If the player completes too many other missions before disarming it, then it explodes and kills thousands. A player rushing through the game or playing a more impatient, less benevolent Shepard would be likely to skip these side quests, either out of personal disinterest or out of a carefully constructed identification in which their Shepard would not be the sort to stop and help others on the way to completing their primary goal.

This is indeed one of the primary ways in which procedural narrative construction and procedural identification work hand in hand towards the same end goal. A player constructing their identification with Shepard such that they ignore the needs of friends and allies in favor of their own glory or simply in the name of expediency will eventually find those allies turning their backs on them or being forced to make hard decisions about which characters they really want to remain friends with at all.<sup>115</sup> On the other hand, a player wishing to play a more altruistic Shepard who aids their friends and takes the time to explore these relationships fully will find these characters growing closer to them. Similarly, fully exploring the game's side quests often leads to narrative consequences of some sort. The fact that these rewards are primarily narrative is also central to effecting the identificatory elements of this procedurality. Many other games give players some sort of ludic reward like weapons or currency based off of the decisions they make. The previously mentioned example from Waggoner's observations on *Morrowind* is a perfect example of this, the monetary reward from keeping the ring might very well encourage the player to make a decision that goes against their desired identification or personal morality in order to gain this in-game benefit. In *Mass Effect*, ludic rewards are typically the same or at least equivalent regardless of the moral decisions the player makes. If renegade decisions were

consistently less ludically rewarding than paragon decisions, then players would have to actively harm themselves in constructing identification with a renegade Shepard.

*Mass Effect* instead rewards players with money or treasure for participating in side quests in the first place then alters narrative consequences based on the decisions made therein. This, then, is one of the primary ways procedural narrative construction and procedural identification work hand in hand. As the player makes their way through the game's story and undertakes side quests, new possibilities and narrative events open up and sometimes even close based on what the player chooses to do. While the player is constructing their identification with Shepard, the procedural narrative construction subtly guides this identification. For example, as the player makes paragon choices and their paragon score increases, more paragon conversation options are opened up. In addition to this, there are some missions that require a certain paragon or renegade score for the player to undertake them in the first place. In addition to this, side quests in the *Mass Effect* series and particularly in *Mass Effect 3* tend to lead to chains of related side quests, meaning that the diligent player will have more opportunities to deepen their identification with Shepard as the procedurally constructed narrative opens up more and more new opportunities for this identification to happen in the first place.

### **HIDING PROCEDURALITY**

Returning once more to *Mass Effect 3* and its Priority: Rannoch mission will help make clear how this works in practice. As previously mentioned, there are two requirements from *Mass Effect 2* that must be met in order to open up the ending in which Shepard makes peace between the quarians and geth. However, there are further requirements in *Mass Effect 3* itself. First is a system called reputation. In *Mass Effect 3*, BioWare moved away from making moral judgments on the final outcome of quests and instead put the emphasis on multiple, smaller



decisions within them. In order to maintain a sort of overarching ludic reward for doing side quests, another points-based system called reputation was added. Reputation is completely neutral and awarded at the end of all quests. However, particularly high amounts of reputation are needed for certain side quests to become available in the first place which requires the completion of side quests earlier in the game. Thus, as discussed previously, the procedural narrative construction works alongside procedural identification by subtly rewarding the diligent player who goes out of their way to help others. Opening up the peaceful ending on Rannoch requires close to the maximum amount of reputation it is possible to earn at that point in the game.

Furthermore, as mentioned previously, Priority: Rannoch brings with it time sensitive side quests that must be completed prior to the Priority mission or else they are considered failed automatically. This is unique even for *Mass Effect 3* because previous time sensitive side quests could still be completed shortly after the Priority mission they were attached to. In this case, the window is shortened significantly with no indication as such to the player. The admirals tell Shepard diegetically that these missions are pressing, but there is no indication that the player will fail them and have to reap the narrative consequences if they are not completed before Priority: Rannoch. Again, this puts some amount of strain on the player's identificatory relationship with Shepard. A player listening intently to their allies would likely understand the urgency being impressed upon them and would follow their heed, whereas a player identifying with a less considerate Shepard would brush them off in the hopes that they could get straight to the task at hand before returning to these seemingly less important quests. Of these two side quests, one absolutely must be completed to open up the peaceful ending at all, just as with Shepard's overall reputation and Tali's status as an admiral. There is, of course, no indication of

the immense narrative reward that will come about as a result of completing this mission and, as usual, it is left up to the player's discretion and identification with Shepard to decide to undertake it.

To briefly review, to open up the option of peace on Rannoch at all the player must have close to max reputation, Tali must be found innocent during her trial in *Mass Effect 2* and one of the side quests that come along with Priority: Rannoch, called Geth Fighter Squadrons, must also be completed beforehand. If all three of those conditions are met, then a separate set of conditions must also be met. After a great deal of testing and experimentation, players broke this down into a hidden "points" system based on the completion and outcome of certain missions,<sup>116</sup> three of which are tied to quests in *Mass Effect 2*. The conditions in *Mass Effect 3* are both based on the second side quest given alongside Priority: Rannoch that allows the player to rescue Admiral Zaal'Koris from his downed ship on Rannoch. Succeeding in this mission gives more "points" but completing it even without saving the admiral does reward some regardless.

In fact, given the way points are distributed, earning the maximum number of points from *Mass Effect 2* would actually make the completion of this side quest in *Mass Effect 3* unnecessary. These three *Mass Effect 2* side quests all quite naturally involve Tali and Legion. First, the player is rewarded for clearing Tali's name without implicating her father, which, as mentioned earlier, requires conversing with the admirals or having an exceptionally high paragon score. Second, in a mission given by Legion to investigate a rogue group of geth, Shepard is rewarded for destroying the geth instead of rewriting them with a virus that will make them hostile to the Reapers. Finally, the player earns points for brokering peace in an argument between Tali and Legion that is started when Legion tries to send information about quarian technology back to the geth.

Thus, all in all, there are nine separate conditions involved in the process of making peace between the geth and quarians, out of which a minimum of seven have to be met in some combination. Some of these decisions, such as Legion's mere presence in *Mass Effect 3*, also have their own prerequisite conditions that must be met. Fully mapping out every quest, condition and mission that is involved in making this ending available would be an exhausting endeavor covering two games and likely dozens of different quests and even individual conversations. Some of these requirements are simply pass or fail, if the player does not meet them then the peaceful solution on Priority: Rannoch never appears in the first place. Others are potentially optional based on other quests the player has completed and decisions they have made. However, the player has no way of knowing this in the moment and even in the immediate run up to Priority: Rannoch. Though there have been indications that a peaceful solution could be reached, the game's characters mention that this would be nearly impossible given the history between the geth and quarians on top of the fact that two of the admirals actually in charge would personally prefer a violent resolution to the conflict. The difficulty of achieving this peace is, then, reflected by how hard it is to achieve given the procedurality of the game's narrative construction.

Though the procedural aspects of the narrative construction leading up to this decision have been thoroughly explained, a more in depth nature of the identificatory aspects of it are now necessary to clarify how even a player who is unaware of the eventual consequences of their decisions can still achieve peace between the geth and quarians by identifying with Shepard in a consistent way. First and foremost, a dutiful or completionist player who undertakes every side quest offered will at least have the chance to meet every requirement. Though side quests are by their very nature optional, players interested in building a stronger identification with Shepard,

learning more about the game's characters, or the galaxy's various races will quite naturally explore the game to its fullest. Though the question of morality may enter the picture here, even a selfish, renegade Shepard could be interested in seeing as much of the galaxy as possible in order to spread their influence and consolidate power. Tali's trial and the side quest offered by Legion, meanwhile, provide viable options for both moralities as well. Finally, the mission to save Zaal'Koris on Rannoch rewards points even if the player allows him to die. In this way, a Shepard making purely paragon or renegade decisions along the way can achieve the peaceful ending and the proper mix of renegade and paragon decisions can as well. Because the game actually rewards the player for consistently playing as paragon or renegade, the player is fairly likely to make exclusively these decisions along the way and thus open up the peaceful ending to Priority: Rannoch.

*Mass Effect 2* and *3*'s procedural narrative construction works hand in hand with its procedural identification at nearly every major juncture and decision point in the narrative to subtly guide the player towards a consistent identification with their Commander Shepard. Though identification can come out of many moments in the game beyond these moments of procedural narrative construction, in the *Mass Effect* series these moments are merged with the identificatory process in order and often with other procedural systems in the game such as morality in order to create profound narrative moments. As many post-modernist writers on identity have argued, identities and identifications are contextual and often created on the fly.<sup>117</sup> Procedural identification fits this broader view of identification perfectly because it, too, is formed in the moment out of sudden, often unexpected narrative junctures. The structure and multiples paths of the labyrinth are briefly laid open to the player in the form of various dialogue choices and their accompanying decisions. However, the ways in which these paths will intersect

with other paths later on is impossible to discern and, as such, the player is left with their past identificatory decisions and how they want to identify with their character in that particular moment. The accumulation of dozens of these decisions, or hundreds even over the course of an entire series such as *Mass Effect* is how the procedural narrative construction of games is capable of producing procedural identification. The underlying structuring logic of the vRPG in turn structures the player's experience of it.

However, powerful as this sort of identification may be, it is also always ephemeral and contextual. One might think, then, that the player has no reason or ability to identify with their player character outside of these procedural moments. However, in my experience and in the experience of many others, this is quite obviously not the case as even more passive or non-narrative moments of gameplay can produce a sense of identification. Indeed, the real-play journal that begins this chapter is partially meant to highlight the fact that identification can grow out of play and exploration and that procedural identificatory moments take on new or contextualized meaning during exploration and combat. The next chapter will delve into the ways that games create identification outside of procedurally constructed narrative moments and decisions.

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## CHAPTER 2 NOTES

<sup>103</sup> There are nine backgrounds the player can possibly choose in *Mass Effect*. First the player picks their history: Spacer (your parents were also part of the human Alliance's military), Earthborn (you were an orphan raised in the slums on Earth and signed on to the Alliance military as early as possible), and colonist (your parents were killed by slavers when you were young and you were enslaved before being freed by an Alliance patrol that you joined up with shortly after). Then, the player picks Shepard's "psychological profile": sole survivor, war hero and ruthless. These profiles also give a small starting bonus to the player's paragon and/or renegade points. Furthermore, each history option is accompanied by a quest exclusive to that background in the first game in the series and, occasionally, background or psychological profile exclusive dialogue options. However, these are really just starting points that ultimately have very little bearing on the character Shepard eventually becomes.

<sup>104</sup> Though the character creation system in the original *Mass Effect* was fairly robust for its time and featured a wide range of skin tones, it was and certainly is now more constraining in terms of actual facial features than systems in many other vRPGs. As a whole, BioWare's preference seems to be for a smaller range of realistic options.

<sup>105</sup> In *D&D*, character morality is determined by a 3x3 gridded system with columns consisting of lawful, neutral and chaotic and rows consisting of good, neutral and evil. Some classes, such as paladins, are essentially required to be good or even lawful good by the game's rules but players are mostly free to determine this alignment for themselves. Furthermore, this alignment has as much or as little bearing on the game as the player(s) and GM desire, as is usual for *D&D*. Typically, it is used as a starting point for roleplaying rather than a defining feature of a character over the course of a campaign.

<sup>106</sup> For example, the earlier BioWare vRPG *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* featured a morality system based off of the *Star Wars* universe's own spectrum from "light side" to "dark side". However, the in-game tallying of these points was such that moving towards one end of the spectrum moved them further away from the opposite end, unlike *Mass Effect's* system where a player could conceivably have a high score in both the paragon and renegade categories.

<sup>107</sup> I say "wrong" here because it makes peace on Rannoch impossible. In the context of the game, this particular mission involves destroying a group of geth or re-writing them to be friendly. Re-writing them is the paragon decision and thus morally "right" by the game's logic, but if Tali's father is exiled then making this particular choice renders peace on Rannoch impossible.

<sup>108</sup> *Serialhobbyiste*. 2015. *Mass Effect: The 'Dialogue Wheel' system done right*. Web. *Serialhobbyiste*. <https://serialhobbyiste.wordpress.com/2015/11/22/fallout-4-and-mass-effect-in-dialogue/>

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<sup>109</sup> This quite intentionally recalls Aarseth's labyrinth in *Cybertext*.

<sup>110</sup> This imagine conveniently demonstrates the way the dialogue wheel displays exclusive morality score-based dialogue options.

<sup>111</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of how Aarseth's and Murray's concept of procedural narrative construction and digital media applies to video games, see chapter 1.

<sup>112</sup> Waggoner describes this in detail in pages 86-90 of *My Avatar, My Self*.

<sup>113</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of Bogost and procedural rhetoric, see the introduction.

<sup>114</sup> Aarseth, *Cybertext*.

<sup>115</sup> *Mass Effect 2* provides an excellent example of this. Several of its characters have fraught interpersonal relationships that eventually come to a head. Shepard can deescalate these conflicts, but only if they have gained the loyalty of both characters through specific side quests. Loyalty eventually determines who is most likely to live or die in the game's final mission and, as such, is an incredibly important narrative device that the player can lose if they rush past these loyalty missions earlier in the game.

<sup>116</sup> Explaining the number of points required and how they are distributed would take too much time in this space, so refer to the *Mass Effect* wikia page on Priority: Rannoch. [http://masseffect.wikia.com/wiki/Priority:\\_Rannoch](http://masseffect.wikia.com/wiki/Priority:_Rannoch).

<sup>117</sup> See Stuart Hall, "Who Needs Identity" or Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* or *Identity Papers*.

### **Chapter 3. Exploration, Spectatorship and Immersion in *The Witcher 3***

I am sitting on my couch again, much the same as earlier. I turn on my PS4 this time and start up *The Witcher 3*. The theme here is much quieter, a soft mix of folk instruments playing in the background. Foregrounded is, again, a subtly animated image of the game's protagonist kneeling in meditation. I am still in the relatively early hours of this game, 15 to 20 at most. My two earlier play throughs of *The Witcher 3* clocked in at well above 50 hours and this time around I chose to play on the descriptively titled "Death March" difficulty, the hardest the game has to offer. The early hours of this play through were brutal and made me think about dropping the difficulty several times. Enemies could often kill me in just a few hits and every battle made me feel as if I was just barely scraping by. Still, on reflection, I liked what this added to the game thematically. I was, after all, a single (albeit magically enhanced) man against hordes of monsters. This should be incredibly difficult and I felt closer to Geralt, my character, as a result of the trials we had been through already. Having played the game before, I knew that the difficulty might level off soon anyways as I settled in to the familiar pattern of hunting down monsters for poor townsfolk while relying on what little grace the land's rulers could spare Geralt in his quest to find his daughter.

The countryside of Velen has seen vastly better days. Though I heard of the war that had raged here just a few months ago, I did not imagine it would still look like a battlefield. White Orchard had been as idyllic as a place can be during a time like this, the midday sun reflected off the golden wheat as wind whispered through the leaves of lush, verdant trees. Though heavy wagon tracks and the Nilfgaardian military's presence had belied the war creeping closer, White Orchard itself was untouched. The second I arrived in Velen it became obvious that even if the war had moved elsewhere, the countryside would bear its scars for years to come. At midday I



arrived in Velen. The slate colored sky hung low and cast a pall over the landscape as a constant stream of rain carried the stench of rotting corpses far and wide. Distant thunder crashed and provided a momentary, eerie glow to the bodies hanging from makeshift gallows. Water pooled everywhere along the roads and attracted flies and mosquitoes or, worse, monsters hoping to prey on unwary travelers. I could not tell why people continued to live in a disease and monster-infested bog, an ugly, leaden place where the brief rays of sunlight barely seemed to touch the still pools of water. But live here they did, and a war always brings out the worst of both men and monsters.

Some think the life of an itinerant monster slayer is glamorous. They imagine travelling across the continent slaying griffins and basilisks, then retiring to the local tavern to enjoy the fruits of their hard-earned wages. What they fail to see is that for every griffin and every tavern, there are ten ghouls or hags as well as the restless nights spent in battlefields of graveyards. The superstitious townsfolk hate their need for us and sometimes blame us for the monsters attacking them in the first place. Still, no peasant is a match for one ghoul, much less the dozens that typically show up after a battle. Hags are far worse, however. Though calling them “sentient” would be giving them too much credit, they are cunning, stealthy and prone to ritualistic behavior that typically involves local children. That is why I am sitting in wait in a graveyard during a moonless, pitch-black night. The handful of ghouls that typically follow more powerful undead were easy enough to dispatch, their limbs flying from their bodies in showers of gore. However, they were not abducting local children and throwing their bones in a cauldron. The hag responsible for the grisly scene I found earlier at an abandoned shack is still somewhere out in the darkness, but I know it returns here every night to dig up the graves for whatever sick purpose it thinks it serves.

Suddenly, I hear it, ragged breathing and the disgusting squelch of rotting flesh moving long after death. I turn and face the hag. Though I have seen dozens in my life, it never truly becomes easier to stomach the sight of such debasement. It stands about five feet tall, but hunches over as if its distended torso is dragging whatever is left of its spine towards the earth. Its arms are longer than any living human's and topped by razor sharp claws and on its back are strapped a number of human bones. Worse, however, is its face. The eyes are entirely white and its mouth is stretched into a degenerate grin out of which falls a two-foot long tongue coated in bright green poison. As the hag rushes towards me, I give it a blast of igni and watch with satisfaction as magical fire singes its skin and what is left of its hair. Clearly wary now, the hag begins circling and testing my guard with half-hearted swipes. I knock these away, knowing that I can bait it into making a mistake. Suddenly it lunges and I dodge out of its way, and then slash at its exposed back. The hag recoils and howls in pain, but immediately lunges again. I barely manage to dodge this time and am only able to stab at it before it regains its composure. However, the hag is gravely wounded and after baiting it into one more charge, I am able to cut it in half from shoulder to waist. I remove its head, a grisly trophy and the receipt I deliver for payment. The town elder pays me what we agreed upon, but I can see in his eyes the contempt he has for me and the work I do.

#### **IDENTIFICATION AND ROLE-PLAYING OUTSIDE OF THE PROCEDURAL NARRATIVE**

In *The Witcher 3*, you play as Geralt of Rivia from Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski's series of novels also titled *The Witcher*. In the world of the games and books, a "witcher" is a magically altered, itinerant bounty hunter and monster slayer. Most of the game's narrative structure is built around Geralt traveling through cities and war-torn rural locales while

collecting bounties and begrudgingly performing tasks for both local and national rulers. Unlike most RPGs, *The Witcher 3* does not feature any sort of character creation process. Geralt's physical features, background and even personality are largely fixed at the beginning of the game. Though the player does get to make hundreds of decisions both large and small as the game progresses, the amount of control over Geralt's personality is somewhat more limited than in other games. Furthermore, much of the game's narrative also denies the sort of enormous influence some RPGs like *Mass Effect 3* feature. Rather than trying to save an entire kingdom or the world itself, Geralt initially sets out to find his missing daughter, Ciri, and save her from a mysterious trio of evil warlords. In the lore of the *Witcher* series, witchers are discriminated against and often seen as a sign of ill fortune. The game's NPCs almost universally distrust Geralt and they often react to his presence negatively even after the player has helped them.<sup>118</sup>

Furthermore, the morality of the world of *The Witcher 3* is murky at best. Though the player makes decisions that directly affect the outcome of quests, these outcomes are typically varying degrees of negative no matter what choice the player makes. The game establishes this in its first side quest where Geralt is tasked with finding the arsonist who burnt down a dwarven blacksmith's forge. Once Geralt finds the arsonist, he learns that he is an alcoholic who burned down the forge purely out of racist animosity. The arsonist tries to bribe Geralt and the player then has the choice to accept this bribe or turn him in to the dwarf and the local military authorities. However, if the arsonist is turned in, the military summarily executes him. By placing this quest just minutes into the game, it establishes very early on that Geralt will often be faced with difficult decisions pitting morality against greed, but that the ostensibly moral decisions will themselves have harsh consequences.

To further emphasize this, *The Witcher 3* does not feature any sort of programmatic or gamified morality system like *Mass Effect's* paragon and renegade system. As a result, the game cannot pass any sort of moral judgment on the decisions offered to the player and cannot build towards a quantified, morality-based identification the way the *Mass Effect* series can. Though players can bring their own moral judgments to the game on top of the game's other character judging Geralt positively or negatively for certain decisions, the game itself has no systematic or programmatic way to evaluate this as *Mass Effect* does. Though this allows the player more flexibility in making decisions, it also means that the game itself cannot as consistently guide the player towards a particular identification.

Presented with an extant protagonist, a world where the player is hated by many of those around them, and decisions that offer murky at best moral consequences, one might wonder where the role-playing or sense of agency in *The Witcher 3* comes from. To uncover this, it is necessary to begin at the graphical level of the game. Though the previous chapters closely investigated the similarities and points of departure between tabletop RPGs and vRPGs as well as how the procedural narrative construction of games creates a sense of identification, the graphical elements of video games have been paid little attention thus far. This is, of course, one of the largest differences between tabletop RPGs and vRPGs and investigating how the graphical elements of games impacts agency and the identificatory process is vital. In *The Language of New Media* (2001), Lev Manovich states that although video games are "3-D computer-generated virtual worlds... usually rendered in linear perspective, they are really collections of separate objects, unrelated to each other" he goes on to compare this to the Renaissance conception of space made by his contemporaries but disagrees with them and instead argues that games are "still at the level of ancient Greece, which could not conceive of space as a

totality.”<sup>119</sup> Though games even at this time featured fully rendered, three dimensional spaces, Manovich still believes that they do not constitute a totality since these spaces are actually collections of objects that are mostly unable to interact with one another. Though the protagonist of *Doom* may be able to navigate and shoot monsters, they cannot interact with the physicality of the space itself in any meaningful way.

Obviously, games have progressed graphically and technologically since Manovich wrote this in 2001. Even still, it is worth remarking on how games are still designed in similar ways as they were when this was written. Though games now have much more realistic and richly detailed 3-D worlds than the games Manovich is speaking of, namely *Doom* and *Myst*, their worlds are frequently just as non-interactive. Like in *Doom*, the player is free to pick up items and kill enemies but this is still often the extent of interactivity offered. Today, destructible environments are often a major selling point of first person shooters in the vein of *Doom* precisely because it is one of the few real leaps in interactivity the genre has been able to offer in the decade plus since *Doom*'s release. Because first-person shooters typically offer no narrative agency whatsoever, environmental interactivity is the only way they can expand the player's ability to impact the world around them. However, the technological advances that allow for truly interactive environments in first person shooters have, of course, made their way into other genres like vRPGs.

In *The Witcher 3*, the interactive relationship of everything in the game world to everything else is abundantly clear. When writing about the 1999 game *Shenmue*, Alexander Galloway coins the term “ambience act” which he defines as “small, visible movements... they signal that the game is still under way, but that no gameplay is actually happening at the moment.”<sup>120</sup> *The Witcher 3* is similarly filled with these moments where the game world persists

even when the player puts their controller down. The sun rises and sets, the wind rustles through the leaves on trees, rain pools in ditches and ripples the surface of placid lakes. When the player actually picks up the controller, their influence over this space quickly becomes evident. The grass parts as Geralt walks through it, his magical abilities can relight extinguished campfires or knock hanged bodies down from their makeshift gallows, even the different layers of clothing and armor he wears subtly move along with him. Minor though all of these things may seem, they impart a rare sense of verisimilitude and totality that even today's technologically advanced games often lack. Geralt and the world exist in a constantly interactive relationship where the player's often minute actions have immediate and tangible impacts upon the world and where similarly inconsequential environmental aspects of the game, such as the wind or weather, actually impact both the player and the world. Though these minor graphical flourishes are indeed small when compared to the enormity of some of the narrative decisions Geralt has to make over the course of the game, they bring a sense of life and reality to the game even outside of these major narrative decisions.

The importance of this in relation to identification becomes apparent slightly later in *The Language of New Media*, where Manovich compares navigating space in video games to “classical American mythology in which the individual discovers his identity and builds character by moving through space.”<sup>121</sup> However, Manovich complicates this somewhat by later saying that the video game's hero is “not developed, and their psychology is not represented. But as these heroes move through space... they are ‘building character’.”<sup>122</sup> It is worth noting once again that the video games Manovich is referring to here are not the sorts that form the backbone of this study. *Doom* was one of the earliest first-person shooters and is still hailed as a landmark of the genre for its frenetic combat and the way it rewarded exploration, but its narrative and

characterization are so rudimentary that the game's protagonist is typically referred to as "Doom guy". *Myst*, meanwhile, is a point and click adventure game where the play explores an island while searching for clues. Though *Myst* has a narrative and even allows the player some measure of control over its ending, the player takes on the role of a nameless, faceless protagonist with no personality of their own.

However, Manovich's point about spatial navigation being an identity and character building process in its own right only strengthens the ability of vRPGs to foster identification. Both *The Witcher 3* and *Mass Effect 3*, as well as the majority of modern vRPGs, are what are often called open world games. In these games, the player is typically free to explore a large territory, sometimes expressed as a single landmass such as in *The Witcher 3* and sometimes a galaxy such as in *Mass Effect 3*, while finding side quests branching off from the game's main narrative at their leisure. In games such as these, much of the content is built in to this free exploration. A game like *The Witcher 3* can easily stretch from 30 hours to over 100 depending on how much time the player spends exploring the massive continent they are placed in. In a game this massive, identification and character development has to occur outside of the procedurally constructed narrative or risk the player becoming alienated from the player character after long bouts of exploration.

In his book *My Avatar, My Self*, Zach Waggoner attempts to explain how games can encourage this sort of identification through a sort of ethical playground. He argues that in video games, "the user is freer to experiment with ethical decisions and test the ramifications of actions."<sup>123</sup> To return briefly to tabletop RPGs, this sort of spatial navigation and boundary testing is either vastly simplified or fundamentally different. Though the characters in a tabletop RPG do indeed explore and navigate space just like a vRPG character, these spaces are either

imaginary or represented by fairly rudimentary diagrams. Furthermore, because tabletop RPGs are collaborative and open-ended it is often difficult to take part in the sort of ethical experimentation offered by procedural vRPGs. The layers of performance in a tabletop RPG often mean that players will shift their ethics quite suddenly based on the rest of the party. Though *Dungeons & Dragons* does technically have a codified morality system, this is more of a loose framework that informs a character's basic personality traits than an organizing, deterministic system like morality in games such as the *Mass Effect* series.

### **IDENTIFICATION, CONTROL AND THE MIRROR STAGE**

To begin to explore the multifaceted nature of identification in games, it is necessary to return to Rehak. In "Playing at Being", he states that "In a specifically agential sense, avatars reduplicate and render in visible form their players' actions... if the avatar is a reflection, its correspondence to embodied reality consists of a mapping not of *appearance* but of *control* [emphasis original]."<sup>124</sup> Again we return to control, though the control Rehak is speaking of here is purely physical control over movement rather than the control over narrative that I have typically been referring to. Still, it is useful to reduce things down to a more basic level because it allows us to understand that identification can indeed grow out of simply navigating a space or a conversation rather than out of making procedurally structured narrative decisions. To clarify this, Rehak also says that "the avatar is not simply a means of access to desired outcomes, but an end in itself – a desired and resented lost object".<sup>125</sup> In other words, one identifies with their avatar simply because one is able to control its movements in space. Though identification does grow out of narrative decisions and events, the simple act of moving an avatar around in a graphically rendered space can also frequently lead to identification.



Put another way, spatial exploration, ethical exploration and identificatory exploration in vRPGs are intrinsically linked processes. Furthermore, these different kinds of exploration mainly exist outside of the procedurally constructed main narrative of the game. Though some level of procedurality is inevitably present, the exploration offered by modern open world vRPGs tends to be relatively unconstrained. As a result, this sort of exploration is a perfect space to examine identification in vRPGs on its own without many of the constraints imposed by procedurality. The earlier discussion of *The Witcher 3* graphical verisimilitude is crucial to this as well. With regard to *Morrowind*, Waggoner claims that, “The user’s level of identification with their avatar is reliant only on the immersive properties of [its] programming and the user’s own decisions within the game’s spaces.”<sup>126</sup> Though all the immersive properties of a game’s programming are too multitudinous to list, graphical realism is certainly high on the list of qualities that contribute to this sense of immersion. Though games have been approaching photorealism for some time, the sort of interactive physical realism of a game like *The Witcher* is often more important than sheer graphical realism.

Now that the subject of immersion has arisen, it would be well worth exploring the term’s usage with regards to digital media and video games. Janet Murray’s definition of immersion given in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* is one of the most persistent and widely used. She describes immersion as,

a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded a completely other reality... in a participatory medium, immersion

implies learning to swim, to do the things that the new environment makes possible<sup>127</sup>

With this definition as a starting point, we can begin to see how different immersion is from my conception of procedural identification. Like post-modern identification in general, procedural identification is structured but always temporary and in the moment. It does not by any means require the player to constantly suture with their player character in precisely the same way. As my previous chapter elucidates, procedural narrative construction does often work towards building a consistent identification but games naturally still allow for some leeway and neither can nor do force the player into a precise identificatory mold. Rather, by offering a limited range of choices that are generated by the game's procedural narrative construction, games can subtly guide players towards a particular identification with their player character.

As Murray's definition should help make clear, immersion is something more pervasive and persistent but also subtler and less capable of guiding the player down a specific identificatory path. Indeed, the sort of identification that grows out of the immersive capabilities of a game is not really procedural in the sense that I have been conceiving of so far. However, it is still a quality unique to games that is well worth exploring in depth because of the way it works alongside procedural identification to produce a holistic identificatory experience that fills in the spaces between major identificatory moments from the game's main narrative. In her 2003 essay "Immersion, Engagement, and Presence", Alison McMahan builds on Murray's definition of immersion by introducing the concept of presence. To do this, she uses Matthew Lombard and Theresa Ditton's definition of presence as an "artificial sense that a user in a virtual environment that the environment is unmediated."<sup>128</sup> McMahan uses this definition in part because of claims at the time that video games could be addictive and treated as such in legal proceedings.<sup>129</sup>

However, she uses it primarily because it allows her to analyze games aesthetically along a number of different axes. She goes on to apply this method to the 2001 game *Myst III: Exile* and concludes that “What makes the *Myst* franchise special are its surprises... players want to read the diaries scattered throughout the world... They want to play with the numerous gadgets like lamps, gears and levers.”<sup>130</sup> In other words, *Myst III*'s sense of presence comes from the experiential realism of the world and the way in which multiple, emergent systems interact in order to create surprising and new experiences for the player. These systems, in fact, typically exist outside of the procedurally structured main story of a game by their very nature.

In a 2002 essay, Jesper Juul outlines the difference between the two fundamental types of games systems: emergence and progression. He defines emergence as “a number of simple rules combining to form interesting variation” and progression as “separate challenges presented serially”.<sup>131</sup> These two concepts map on rather well to immersion or presence and procedural identification respectively. The game's actual ludic gameplay elements provide its emergent properties whereas the procedurally constructed narrative constitutes the game's actual progression. The combat described in the real-play journal at the beginning of this chapter is a prime example of how the emergent qualities of a game work. Though the rules by which combat operates in a video game are still programmatic, they are not exactly procedural in the sense that a game's narrative construction is. Though combat is programmatically bound by a specific set of rules, these rules all interact incredibly quickly and do not necessarily lead to a specific end or goal in the way that the progression-based narrative elements of the game. For example, when the player dodges away from enemies like a hag they may dodge too early and put themselves out of position for a counter attack or dodge too late and still get hit. Similarly, it is sometimes possible to bait out certain attacks from the game's AI by maintaining a particular

distance or opening the player character up to attacks briefly, but this is never a perfect system that always leads towards a precise conclusion like the procedural narrative elements of a game.

Instead, these emergent moments work to maintain a much more general sense of identification with the player character in the gaps between moments of procedural identification. Simply playing a game like *The Witcher 3* and killing monsters does not lead to a specific identification with Geralt as the player would likely be doing these things regardless of their narrative decisions. The sense of identification that comes from the emergent elements of a game is not entirely dissimilar from procedural identification, however, as both are fundamentally a matter of agency. To return once more to Janet Murray, she defines agency as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices.”<sup>132</sup> The result of combat in a game like *The Witcher 3* is often nothing more than slain enemies, but this is still a noticeable impact that the player has on the world. Furthermore, as my real play account earlier should once again demonstrate, the player must necessarily express this more basic sort of agency over the game in order to exert any sort of actual narrative agency over it. To understand precisely how this leads to identification, it is necessary to return once more to Rehak and theories of identification and spectatorship from film studies more generally.

To explain this in more detail, it would be useful to return to a point in the real-play journal that started this chapter. As mentioned there, I had been re-playing *The Witcher 3* on its hardest difficulty. Although I already had a well-formed sense of identification with Geralt’s personality because of my past experiences playing through the game’s narrative, this time through the game forged a much stronger identification with his job as a witcher. As mentioned previously, the game’s “Death March” difficulty is aptly named a brutally difficult in the early hours. It created a much deeper sense of immersion in the game because it made the job of

killing monsters actually feel incredibly dangerous and difficult. On earlier attempts at the game, Geralt's complaints about his job and the local townsfolk's inability to deal with monsters on their own had felt a bit jarring due to how easily I was able to cut them down. At the highest difficult, however, I felt a much more genuine appreciation for how outmatched even Geralt might be in the face of the monsters he was sent off to slay. What this also usefully shows is that even after playing a game multiple times, it is still possible to form new and deeper feelings of identification with a player character because of the ability to modify a game's difficult and thus the entire experience of actually playing it.

One of the most interesting comments that Rehak makes in "Playing at Being" is that "the avatar is not simply a means of access to desire outcomes, but an end in itself—a desired and resented lost object, existing in endless cycles of renunciation and reclamation."<sup>133</sup> To put this into context, bringing in one of Rehak's main references in Christian Metz would be useful. In an early chapter of his book *The Imaginary Signifier*, Metz states that in cinema, "the spectator *identifies with himself*, with himself as a pure act of perception... as the condition of possibility of the perceived and hence as a kind of transcendental subject" [emphasis original].<sup>134</sup> Metz does this in order to get around the problem of how identification in film can function in non-narrative films that lack a central subject for the spectator to identify with. However, what it also reveals is that spectatorship in and of itself is an identificatory experience in film because of the spectator's capacity to identify with themselves through the act of spectatorship. Furthermore, Metz also argues earlier on in this same chapter that "[the spectator] has to identify... if he did not the film would become incomprehensible".<sup>135</sup> In Metz's view, a basic level of identification is one of the primary ways we make sense of art and the world around us as a whole. Without this sense of

identification, we are adrift in a meaningless world because of our incapability to understand anything around us.

This, then, is also why Metz and Rehak rely so heavily on Lacan and why Metz states that identification in film is possible even without a subject because the spectator always already identifies with themselves. In the Lacanian view of psychoanalysis, children first learn to identify and identify with their own reflect in what he termed the “mirror stage”.<sup>136</sup> Rehak explains this by stating that “The ego formed through identification with a reflection or representation of itself is thus forever split, rendered incomplete by the very distinction that enables self-recognition.”<sup>137</sup> In other words, every identification is always already a misidentification because the original identification with our own reflection was itself imperfect. However, this original identification is also the one we fall back on when no others easily present themselves and is always present to some degree because of its primacy in our lives. This is how Rehak goes on to argue that through a cycle of life and death, the video game avatar completes an “arc of desire” and acts as an end itself.<sup>138</sup> Thus, we can see how agency and the avatar produce a sense of identification all on its own even before the narrative elements of the game come into play. Simply controlling an avatar is a source of pleasure and identification, even if that identification is ultimately with oneself. This is precisely the “satisfying power” that Murray speaks of as well.<sup>139</sup>

#### **SPECTATORSHIP AND THE VIDEO GAME AVATAR**

Rehak’s article, written in 2003, refers to incredibly simplistic games like *Pac-Man* and *Space Invaders* while also making reference to modern games of the time such as *Doom*, *Wolfenstein 3D*, and *Myst*. He applies this conception of the mirror stage evenly and, though he does expand upon it for the three-dimensional and more realistically rendered spaces of modern

games, he explains that players relate to all video game avatars in this way no matter how simplistic. If even a yellow circle with eyes like Pac-Man or even a handful of pixels in the vague shape of a spaceship as in *Space Invaders* can be objects of player identification according to this mirror stage relationship, then surely the avatars featured in far more advanced games such as *The Witcher 3* and *Mass Effect 3* are as well. Indeed, these avatars do follow the same basic pattern of recognition and misrecognition that Rehak outlines in his article. The control a player has over their avatar is never perfect. Avatars frequently behave in ways that players do not intend because of the emergent rules of games and the general imprecision of video game controls. In my real play example from *The Witcher 3*, for instance, the water hag could have hit me because I genuinely mis-timed a dodge, because I dodged at an angle that clipped into her tongue's hitbox or simply because the game dropped my input and failed to execute a dodge at all.<sup>140</sup>

To further understand the ways in which games can create a sense of immersion and identification simply through gameplay itself despite the imperfection of one's control over their avatar, it is necessary to return to film-centric theories of spectatorship and identification. In his 2015 book *Dreaming of Cinema*, Adam Lowenstein uses Roger Caillois' theories of mimicry to explain the identificatory power of film, the seductiveness of spectatorship and the desire to collapse oneself into a world through identification and immersion. Caillois himself is notable for attempting to construct an all-encompassing theory of play and its purpose to humans and animals as a whole. In his 1959 treatise on the subject titled *Man, Play, and Games* he defines play as "essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life, and generally engaged in with precise limits of time and place."<sup>141</sup> He then breaks play down into four separate categories, the most important of which for this study and Lowenstein's own theorization is

mimicry. Caillois borrows this term from the insect world quite deliberately because it “seems like the most divergent of solutions provided by nature... the inexplicable mimetism of insects immediately affords an extraordinary parallel to man’s penchant for disguising himself, wearing a mask or *playing a part*” [emphasis original].<sup>142</sup> He then goes on to describe the pleasure of mimicry as “being or passing for another... the rule of the game is unique: it consists in the actor’s fascinating the spectator, while avoiding an error that might lead the spectator to break the spell. The spectator must lend himself to the illusion”.<sup>143</sup> In other words, the one and only consistent rule of games of mimicry is that the “actor” or spectator must never break the illusionary spell. Both parties must mutually and implicitly agree to accept this illusion in order to give it any real power.

Lowenstein’s view on this is fairly similar as he argues that “Caillois’s mimicry is not an instinct for self-preservation but for self-abandonment” and claims that it contains aspects of “self-erasure and depersonalization”.<sup>144</sup> Lowenstein then shifts to Lacan’s own usage of Caillois in his theory of the mirror stage and identification, stating that Caillois’s theories supported Lacan’s “sense of how human mechanisms of identification cannot be reduced to comforting notions of adaptation and altruism but fall closer to aggression, fragmentation, and disintegration.”<sup>145</sup> Lowenstein then begins to turn Lacan’s reading of Caillois towards his own arguments on spectatorship by stating that it “reveals a surrealist framework for understanding identification through the body rather than just the mind... Lacan’s fragmented body shares with Caillois’s mimicking body a radical blurring of boundaries between self and space”.<sup>146</sup> Lowenstein then goes on to apply this to David Cronenberg’s 1999 film *eXistenZ* because it perfectly demonstrates



Caillouis's earlier arguments about mimicry as the lure of becoming space. Isn't it possible that viewers mimic not only Pikul and Geller [two of the film's main characters] but also the setting of the game itself? That viewers desire to get lost in the world of the game... in ways beside or beyond character or star identification?<sup>147148</sup>

Lowenstein's comments on the capacity of viewers to identify with the space itself works perfectly alongside both Metz's argument that identification is possible even without a central subject character and Manovich's comments on the totality of space in video games.

Additionally, Manovich's argument that video games at the time of *The Language of New Media* were not totalizing spaces reveals that this is a problem unique to the medium. If film spectatorship is seen as an act of mimicry the way that Lowenstein does, then one can come to the conclusion that film never had this issue from the outset. If viewers allow themselves to be enthralled by the illusion of the reality of the world within the film, then the viewer must also accept that world as a totalizing space.

Even though games are fully rendered graphical spaces, they actually have a somewhat more difficult time convincing the viewer of their illusion of reality precisely because they are also interactive spaces. The video game player can probe the world of the game for inconsistencies both large and small and discover the spaces where their agency is imperfect. Furthermore, the imperfection of game controls can itself break the player's immersion on accident. It is only recently with game worlds like that of *The Witcher 3* that video games have become totalizing spaces where complex, procedurally constructed narratives and the identification that attends that has been fused with realistic worlds that can respond to even minute actions on the part of the player. The grass that parts as Geralt walks through it and the

way his layered armor shifts during battle are not just extraneous graphical flourishes. Instead, they are vital parts of a totalizing game space in which the player feels as if their agency can impact everything in that world from the overarching narrative right down to the plant life in it. Lowenstein's comment that mimicry is partially about the lure of becoming space is fully realized in video games because of the way in which players can fully inhabit and experience it. Film space is totalizing, but always illusory. The spectator must simply accept that they cannot personally explore this space in order to maintain the illusion. By making the spectator of video game space an active participant in its existence and inhabitation, video games blur the boundary between illusion and reality itself. The necessity of mutual participation in an illusion that is characteristic of mimicry and film spectator is lessened because the player takes on a more active role.

Furthermore, it is well worth remarking on the confluence between the violence of exploration in video games and the violence of identification in the Lacanian view. As is probably apparent through my descriptions, much of the exploration in *The Witcher 3* involves the player fighting their way through the countryside. Indeed, nearly everything in the game's world seems hostile to Geralt whether that violence comes from monsters, human bandits or wild animals. Probing the limits of the world necessarily involves taking part in a great deal of violence and combat. Though there are certainly quiet, pensive moments that resemble the "ambiance act" Galloway describes, much of the gameplay almost necessarily requires the metaphysical violence of "self-erasure" that Lowenstein relates to Lacanian identification. Indeed, the player likely has no frame of reference for the violence exploration being undertaken by Geralt and, thus, to identify with him in these moments they must necessarily lose or erase

themselves. Because players can actively and often aggressively explore the space of the game, it then becomes easier to lose or erase themselves in the experience of playing.

Though this may seem contradictory, it fits in perfectly with modernist theories of identification as well as Lacan's own. Recall that Lacan viewed identification as inherently fragmented and aggressive because of the fundamental misrecognition of oneself from the mirror stage. Furthermore, in *My Avatar, My Self*, Waggoner refers to feminist scholar Diana Fuss's conception of identity as "always shifting" and "contextual... with none having any lasting primacy over the others."<sup>149</sup> Furthermore, it works alongside the momentary and necessarily fragmented nature of procedural identification. As I have elucidated in previous chapters, procedural identification is almost always contextual and in the moment of a major narrative or moral decision. The sort of identification brought about by exploration is similarly fragmented, but it is more fragmented amongst multiple parties and aspects of the game world than fragmented temporally like procedural identificatory moments. The player could at different points identify with Geralt, a non-player character or even the world of the game itself simply through their experience of it. These identifications shift easily and subtly just as identity itself does outside of video games.

The game's frequent monster bounties are an excellent example of how this plays out in the game. These bounties are one of the most common types of side quests offered and they are almost universally intimate but short tales of loss and grief. One of the earliest in the game sees Geralt investigate the murder of a husband and wife at the hands of a local ruler. The woman's spirit is still haunting the place where she died and the man who initially offers Geralt the bounty is concerned about being unable to draw water for his sick daughter from the well her spirit is lingering near. The spirit itself is by far one of the hardest fights Geralt faces early on in the

game and even forces him to use one of his magical abilities to trap the spirit and fight it. Though the player does not have to make any important or momentous decisions as part of this quest, there are still a number of identificatory moments offered throughout. The man issuing the bounty is worried for his sick and soon to be married daughter while the murdered husband and wife were victims of an insane, deceitful lord. Geralt uncovers all of this as a natural but required part of progressing through the quest and eventually becomes an object of identification himself during the fight with the spirit in which the player gains a deeper understanding for his skill in battle as well as for the difficulties of life as a witcher.

The Lacanian view of the mirror stage combined with a psychoanalytic approach to identification via film studies helps present a far richer picture of how identification functions in games. Though procedural identification is no doubt important, this exact type of identification cannot be maintained throughout a game's entirety by its very nature. Though it helps build towards a consistent identification during narrative moments both major and minor, modern vRPGs typically feature dozens of hours of gameplay outside of the main narrative where procedural identification cannot truly occur. Though the sort of identification described in this chapter does not encourage the sort of consistent and necessarily even coherent identification that is created by a vRPG's procedural narrative construction, it is still a sort of identification. Furthermore, it is a kind of identification that practically any video game is capable of generating regardless of the narrative qualities or kind of protagonist it has. The psychoanalytic theories from film advanced by Lacan and Lowenstein are useful precisely because they reveal how the fragmentary and even aggressive nature of identification allows the player to identify with spaces through the sort of exploratory agency video games can uniquely provide. Though the player is still a sort of spectator due to their always imperfect control of the player character and the

programmatically limited capabilities in the video game space, this slippage is actually productive because of the fundamental misrecognition at the core of Lacan's mirror stage. This together with procedural identification is why games can create and maintain incredibly powerful feelings of identification even over the course of dozens of hours.

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**CHAPTER 3 NOTES**

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<sup>118</sup> This is exemplified by many of the game's monster bounty side quests. Even after Geralt brings proof that the monster has been slain, any deaths that occurred during the process and often even before Geralt arrived will be blamed on him. Rather than being seen as heroic monster slayers, many people in the world of the game view witchers as a supernatural force that attracts monsters.

<sup>119</sup> Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 2001), 257

<sup>120</sup> Galloway, *Gaming*, 10

<sup>121</sup> Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 271

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 271-272

<sup>123</sup> Waggoner, *My Avatar, My Self*, 88

<sup>124</sup> Rehak, "Playing At Being," 5

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 5

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 58

<sup>127</sup> Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* 98-99

<sup>128</sup> Matthew Lombard and Theresa Ditton, "At the Heart of it All: The Concept of Presence," *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* 3 no. 2 (1997), 4.

<sup>129</sup> Alison McMahan, "Immersion, Engagement, and Presence: A method for analyzing 3-D Video Games", *The Video Game Theory Reader* eds. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2003), 70

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 83

<sup>131</sup> Jesper Juul, "The Open and the Closed", *Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference Proceedings* ed. Frans Mäyrä (Tampere, Finland: Tampere UP, 2002), 323-329

<sup>132</sup> Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 126

<sup>133</sup> Rehak, "Playing at Being," 5

<sup>134</sup> Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977), 49

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 46

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<sup>136</sup> For a more in-depth explanation of this as it pertains to film theory and games, see Rehak, "Playing at Being," 3.

<sup>137</sup> Rehak, "Playing at Being," 3

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 5

<sup>139</sup> Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 126

<sup>140</sup> A "hitbox" is how games programmatically determine when two objects come into collision. Every object in a game is invisibly outlined by a hitbox that defines the boundaries of that object. Although hitboxes today are molded closely to the objects they belong to, they always extend just slightly past the object and when two objects are in motion, such as in the example of dodging given here, hitboxes can and often do contact one another in ways that seem unfair or wrong to the player.

<sup>141</sup> Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (Illinois UP, 2001) excerpted from *The Game Design Reader*, eds. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (MIT University Press, 2006) 125

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 135

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 137-138

<sup>144</sup> Adam Lowenstein, *Dreaming of Cinema* (Columbia UP, 2014), 54

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 58

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 58

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 61

<sup>148</sup> The fact that Lowenstein chooses *eXistenZ* as his object of analysis is worth remarking since the film saw Cronenberg comment on video games' unique ability to fulfill the desire for, as Lowenstein terms it, "self-erasure" (58). Though Lowenstein does not cite Rehak, this certainly recalls his argument that video game avatars fulfill a complete arc of desire simply through their ability to die and be reborn constantly. They allow the player to experience self-destruction in a safe and sometimes even positive way, the clearest example of their ability to fulfill the desire to erase oneself.

<sup>149</sup> Waggoner, *My Avatar, My Self* 24-25

## **Conclusion: Reconfiguring vRPGs, Reconfiguring Identification**

As an avid fan of video games and particularly of the sorts of vRPGs described in this thesis, one of the initial questions that led to everything herein was “why do I and so many others feel such a profound connection to our player characters and what unique formal qualities of games makes this possible?” I began both this thesis and my own research with procedurality because this is the underlying formal property of games as a whole. Procedurality structures games from their underlying code up to incredibly complex, interlocking things such as identification, agency, exploration and play itself. Though I do believe that procedural identification is absolutely necessary to create the richest identificatory experience possible, my final chapter was meant to indicate that this is far from the only way in which games can create a sense of identification. Agency and the presence of any sort of choice at all are other unique ways games can create a sense of identification and though this is not as structured or consistent as procedural identification, it is still identification in its own right. Furthermore, this is always already structured by the procedurality of the game’s underlying code. Even when the player believes they are freely exploring, they are still having their experience shaped and guided by the game’s procedurality.

A second, more general reason I chose to focus this study on video games is that I believe they are still a medium going through a rapid maturation process. Year after year, games become more advanced and refined. Not just graphically, but also in terms of how they are capable of taking advantage of their unique formal properties to tell stories, develop characters, and encourage identification. Furthermore, game genres are not so



neat as I might have made them appear at times in this thesis. I necessarily had to wall off vRPGs as a distinct genre in order to make their connection to tabletop RPGs clear, but as Rehak explains in “Playing at Being” all games require one to take on a role.<sup>150</sup> However, in this conclusion, I want to try to embrace this claim and show how procedural identification occurs in games that do not fit the strict vRPG genre I presented throughout this thesis. If every video game can potentially be seen as a vRPG, then the question then becomes how and to what degree does the game both ask and allow the player to play their role. As time has gone on and games as a genre have matured, more and more games have seen the inclusion of distinct role-playing elements like *Mass Effect* style conversation wheels or simply branching narrative decisions based off of dialogue.

The games prominently featured thus far in this thesis were chosen in part because I thought they represented something exemplary about games as a medium within the vRPG genre. However, as previously mentioned, the vRPG label can be applied flexibly and potentially to any video game given that all games require playing a role of some sort. Furthermore, though series like *Mass Effect* or *The Witcher* use practically every generic feature of RPGs including leveling systems, statistics, skills, and the ability to frequently alter the narrative or the player character’s relationship to other characters vis-à-vis dialogue choices, game designers also frequently pick and choose a handful of these elements to implement into their games rather than making use of all of them. For example, many games today have unlockable skills but no true experience system or allow the player to make narrative decisions but lack a skill and experience

system entirely. Some games lack all of these elements and instead have incredibly robust systems for spatial exploration and experimentation with the game's ludic systems.

All of these various RPG systems and elements are ultimately about giving the player control over some aspect of the game that is always filtered through a layer of procedurality. Whether this procedurality is narrative construction, avatar development, or the ways the player can interact with the environment, it works towards constructing a sense of identification around the highly structured experience of playing the game itself. Although the games I focused on in previous chapters do all of these things to differing degrees, games can lack some of these elements entirely while emphasizing others to still create procedural identification. Late in the process of writing this thesis, as recently as February and March of 2017, several other games have been released that I believe sit at the intersection of my primary concerns and at the forefront of what games are capable of as a medium. The primary one I will focus on for the bulk of this conclusion is *Nier: Automata*. I would like to use this conclusion to briefly sketch the way it uniquely take advantage of the formal properties of games to create identificatory experiences in new and exciting ways in order to indicate both the ways my own research can be used going forward and the direction I believe games are going as a whole.

*Nier: Automata* was released by Japanese developer Platinum Games in February of 2017. It is a sequel to the 2010 game *Nier*, which was itself a sort of sequel to the 2003 game *Drakengard*. While the relationship between the original *Nier* and *Drakengard* is convoluted, *Automata* is a direct sequel to *Nier* set over 9,000 years into the future. All three game sin this series were directed by Japanese games designer Yoko Taro. Taro

uses a unique method he terms “backwards scriptwriting” wherein he starts by writing the conclusion of his games and works backwards by writing the game’s other major moments of either emotional or plot development.<sup>151</sup> This mirrors some of my earlier claims that procedural identification itself works off of presenting choices to the character that have major impacts either on other characters emotionally or on the narrative as a whole. Though *Automata* presents few choices to the player, Taro’s scriptwriting process obviously reflects the importance of procedural plot development with specific moments where the player is asked or more able to identify with the player character. Furthermore, one of the other hallmarks of Taro’s games are their multiple, often highly divergent endings. The choices the player does get to make throughout his games culminate in these endings and thus, although the player is asked to make few narrative decisions relative to something like *Mass Effect* or *The Witcher 3*, these choices are often just as impactful in the way they shape the narrative and the way the player can identify with their player character.

*Automata* is also useful to this conclusion because it helps to show how games can make use of some roleplaying elements while leaving others behind. Although *Automata* does feature a leveling system, the only in-game impact leveling up has is allowing the player access to new content such as better weapons and harder side missions. There is no traditional skills system like in a tabletop RPG or in a vRPG like the *Mass Effect* series or *The Witcher 3*, the player has no control over 9S or 2B’s appearance and, as already mentioned the player is presented with a fairly limited number of choices during the game’s narrative. However, the choices the player does get to make

are rather important and the game features some creative ways to reward the player's agency and identification such as alternate, technically non-diegetic endings.

Furthermore, what *Automata* most clearly shows is how procedural identification can be applied to any game with even minor RPG elements rather than the more traditional vRPGs that are heavily indebted to tabletop roleplaying that have characterized my thesis up to this point. Because games are procedural by their very nature, they can all make use of procedural identification and *Automata* is a game that deploys it in remarkable and unique ways that are quite different from those previously explained.

The world of *Automata* is set thousands of years in the future. What remains of the human race lives on the moon while the earth is constantly fought over by sentient androids built by the humans and machines built by a mysterious alien race that invaded earth thousands of years before the game began. The player begins the game controlling 2B, one of the androids sent to earth to investigate and fight the machines. She is accompanied by another android named 9S. Though the player is told early on that the machines are universally hostile and incapable of emotions, they quickly discover that this is untrue. Many machines wandering around the world of the game do not attack the player and the player eventually discovers an entire group of machines that have decided to live in a pacifist clan in a forest. The game often subverts the player's knowledge about the world both through narrative events and through exploration in this way, often catching them off-guard with new plot developments and emotional revelations.

The intentional confusion caused by the discrepancy of information provided by the game and the game's character was not just felt by me, it was often mirrored by 2B

and 9S. Though they frequently repeated that the machines were their enemies and that they could not feel actual emotions, the doubt and worry in their voices became more and more evident as the game went on. Furthermore, the plot often puts them in situations where they openly question orders and knowledge from their android and human superiors because of what they actually see and experience. I quickly found myself questioning everything the game told me, particularly when it came to information related by humans through pre-recorded messages or in orders from 9S and 2B's android commanders. One of the most creative and important things *Automata* does in terms of structure and the formal qualities of games, however, is the way it treats its endings. Previous to *Automata*, Taro was already well known for the multiple endings he included in his games and the often-convoluted process of achieving them. *Nier* and *Nier: Automata* both have multiple diegetic endings that require playing the game multiple times, for example. *Automata* takes this one step further by having 26 separate endings, each corresponding to a letter of the alphabet. While only five of these, A-E, are technically diegetic or part of the game's main narrative, they can all be seen as rewards for the player's agency over the game.

For example, if the player kills all of the pacifist machines at any point after meeting them they are given an ending screen and then allowed to load a save prior to killing the machines to continue to one of the "true" endings.<sup>152</sup> Similarly, fleeing certain boss battles or abandoning characters at key points in the game will also lead to semi-official endings. The game even has some joke endings that appear as a surprise. For instance, eating a certain kind of fish offered by one of the game's non-player characters

results in instant death and another unique ending screen. Recall now that in *Gaming*, Alexander Galloway calls the “game over” screen both machinic and non-diegetic.<sup>153</sup> What *Automata* does with these endings is bring what would typically be a non-diegetic game over screen into the diegesis of the game, vastly increase the player’s agency. It intentionally blurs this line by acknowledging the F-Z endings narratively but then allowing the player to go back to the game’s critical path. Even though these endings are explicitly regarded not treated as canon by the game itself, they do provide new ways for the player to see their agency reflected or see some sort of narrative outcome for identifying with the player character in ways that might otherwise be unintended by the game’s primary narrative.

The typical game over screen exists outside of the game’s narrative by default because the player’s character is not meant to die or fail during the normal course of gameplay. The F-Z endings of *Automata* reward the player’s agency even in failure and bring this failure into the full context of the game’s narrative. Furthermore, though these endings are technically not official within the world of the game because the player is allowed to reload an earlier save and continue on after them, they also provide distinct identificatory moments for the player. If the player truly believes that the machines are not a threat, they can flee an important boss battle and receive an ending stating that 2B and 9S decided to go fishing together and live out the rest of their lives together in peace while the machines continue to control earth. Though the player must then return to the game’s narrative and complete this boss battle as intended to get one of the “true” A-E endings, their agency and failure to play the game by its rules is still rewarded.

Furthermore, these endings also have an interesting procedural element precisely because so many of them are achieved by ignoring or outright resisting the game's rules. As stated earlier, in most games this sort of behavior leads to a non-diegetic game over screen. *Automata*, on the other hand, responds to the player's disregard for the game's procedurality by rewarding them procedurally thus making more apparent the interaction between game and player that is going on as the story develops. This eventually becomes a major element much later on during the game's final true ending.

Returning to the game's main narrative and its five official endings will help make clear how this system creates a completely unique identificatory regime that is due to both procedurality and spatial exploration. The game initially seems to end with 2B and 9S defeating two android-like beings created by the machines. In the process of killing them, 9S is infected by a computer virus and must be killed by 2B. However, he then resurrects his consciousness through the surrounding machines and the game ends with 9S in the form of a giant machine lifting 2B in his hand. The game then ends and the credits roll, after which the player is given the option to save. If they do so, they can then load this save and find themselves controlling 9S at the very beginning of the game's initial narrative. The player then proceeds down what seems like exact same narrative they have just experienced, but as 9S many things are now different. New cutscenes, new side quests and even entirely new missions at a later point in the narrative now recontextualize the same spaces and experiences.

Simply from playing through the game once as 2B, the player likely already has an extant identification or at least relationship with 9S. For example, 9S is far more

outspoken about his beliefs that the machines are their enemies and only begrudgingly works alongside them. By allowing the player to experience all of these narrative events over again through his eyes, this is contextualized so that the player understands his initial position and, more importantly, how he changes over the course of the narrative. By seeing his experiences, and particularly those that differ from 2B's, the player gains an understanding of 9S's unique beliefs and opinions and can thus form an identification with him separate of the one they might have had with 2B. By literally seeing this narrative through a new set of eyes and thus seeing entirely new narrative events develop procedurally, the game aids the player in constructing this new identification.

Rather than being a simple way to pad the game's length, this is essentially an entirely new experience of the game as befits seeing it through a new character's eyes. When first playing as 2B, 9S is the most adamant about the machines being lesser than the androids because of their incapacity for sentient thought or emotions. However, when playing as 9S this is shown to be patently false both in the world of the game and in his own mind. Many of the new scenes added to the pre-existing narrative show that the machines are capable of love, loss, introspection and incredibly deep philosophical thought. A boss fight against what seemed like a mindless machine as 2B is revealed to be the result of unrequited love driving the machine to insanity when she is defeated again as 9S. Though there are dialogue options offered to the player during both of these halves of the same narrative, it is the exploration and recontextualization of spaces and narrative events that most effectively builds a sense of identification between the player and the two characters they play as. As mentioned previously, the game itself frequently



calls into question the things its non-player characters tell 2B and 9S and the player joins 2B and 9S in their quest to uncover the truth of the world around them and sees the world through their perspectives in much more direct way than in most games. Thus, the player is quite naturally put into an identificatory relationship with them.

Though the player makes few decisions as 9S or 2B, simply playing as both of them is a procedurally identificatory experience in its own right. For example, many already significant moments in the game's narrative as 2B have new cutscenes or context when re-experienced with 9S. Furthermore, some of the game's F-Z endings are only possible when playing as 9S, against underscoring his position as a unique character and an entirely separate object of identification. By actually experiencing these differences, *Automata* can structure and then restructure the player's identification with both 2B and 9S. It is necessary to play as both of them to fully understand their characters and the plot of the game itself because of the new developments that unfold procedurally as the player makes their way through the game a second time. By subjecting the player to this restructured experience of a narrative they have previously witnessed, the game's underlying procedurality can subtly point towards the many surface level differences between 2B and 9S and thus help the player construct a unique but consistent identification with both. Indeed, what this aspect of *Automata* helps point to is how the procedurality of games can always guide the player towards identification even in the absence of major narrative decisions.

Instead, the game gives the player narrative agency through the option to play through the game multiple times to achieve its multiple endings and by recontextualizing

things through 9S' eyes. Indeed, one of the main narrative thrusts of the game is the importance of personal experience to one's sense of self. Many of the machines and androids the player talks to worry frequently about losing the memory of their experiences and thus what they consider their identity. The game reinforces this ludically by providing vastly different gameplay styles and narrative events between 2B and 9S. While playing as 2B, the game is a fairly straightforward action adventure game where the player uses melee weapons in conjunction with a fully automatic floating turret to fight enemies. 9S, however, is a scouting android in the game's narrative and this is reflected in combat by the fact that he can hack the machines and defeat them through a minigame similar to *Space Invaders* or *Galaga*. Furthermore, this is reflected narratively by the new details uncovered about enemies, NPCs and places in the world. The player understands the differences between 2B and 9S as characters because of how different the experience of playing them is and thus can build a unique sense of identification with both.

Though it may sound like *Automata* lacks the procedural narrative construction of the more traditional vRPGs described in much of this thesis, the game reveals more depth as the player makes their way through its multiple endings. Here it would also be useful to reiterate why procedurality and procedural narrative construction are so central to this thesis. As mentioned in my introduction and first chapter, there are elements of procedurality in tabletop RPGs. The narrative of these games are not truly procedural, however, as there are no rules given for how to construct them. Video games and vRPGs are unique in this regard because there are strict rules guiding their narrative construction

that the player has no real ability to deviate from. However, also as mentioned earlier, this adds new potential for agency and identification even as it removes those given by the creativity that comes along with a tabletop RPG. What video games offer instead is the ability to participate in constructing a procedural narrative with the software of a game. As mentioned in the intro, this makes video games and vRPGs one of the best examples of Roland Barthes' structural activity where the player's self-identity, and thus their identification with anything in the world of the game is structured, "according to the demands of the form."<sup>154</sup> The pleasure of identification, and indeed many of the pleasures of games in general, lies within this more structured experience.

In relation to this, one of the major differences between tabletop RPGs and video games is the ability of video games to constantly give the player feedback. Chun describes this process when she states that playing a game is in part a process of "reverse engineer[ing] its algorithm or at the very least link[ing] its actions to its programming."<sup>155</sup> Though most games keep this process hidden from the player, following the classical narrative belief that breaking the fourth wall is verboten, *Automata* intentionally hails its player as a party involved in this procedural narrative construction and even requests that they identify with the characters and the game's other players during its final decision. At the very end of the game, the player is put into what initially seems like one of the hacking minigames they have become accustomed to while playing as 9S. However, the enemies in this case are the game's own credits. As headings and names fill the screen, they begin to fire at the player and the player must destroy them to proceed. As the credits roll on, this minigame becomes harder and harder until the entire screen is filled

with projectiles. At this point, the player cannot practically avoid death. When the player does die, they respawn but lose some of the progress they have made and also have a closer, more limited view. In other words, the minigame becomes harder every time the player dies while also naturally becoming harder the further they proceed into it. These compounding levels of difficulty eventually make it impossible to proceed further at which point a new wrinkle is added to this sequence.

This new element comes in the form of messages along side the typical option to continue or quit. These messages are almost exclusively supportive in nature, ensuring the player that the payoff is worth it or that help is on the way. As the player continues to die, these messages become more numerous until they, too, fill the entire screen after death. Eventually, the player is given the option to accept help. If the player chooses to do so their ship is surrounded by several others, making them impervious to damage while also dramatically increasing the damage that they can deal. The other ships surrounding the player can be destroyed, however, and when this occurs the damaged ship falls off and is replaced by a new one, along with a message saying that a player's data has died.

Though all of this may be confusing in the moment, the player also has little time to think about it as they blast their way through the credits. At this point, it is impossible to die and as long as the player keeps shooting, they eventually make their way to the end. At this point, the floating pod who had been following 2B and who becomes a minor character in its own right directly addresses the player and asks them if they want to sacrifice their data in order to help other players. They are told explicitly that agreeing to

this will mean that all of their save data will be deleted and though this is the very end of the game, it means they will have to start all over from nothing if or when they want to play the game again. When presented with this choice, I barely hesitated to accept the sacrifice of my data because I knew full well at this stage how this sacrifice would help others. After accepting this, the player then gets to write out a message to leave to other players. Judging from the hundreds of messages I saw along the way and from the dozens of players whose data was sacrificed to help me towards the end, it was obvious that I was far from alone in making this decision.

What *Automata* does here at the end is openly invite the to identify and empathize with their fellow players player through its procedural narrative construction. The player has to try and fail a certain number of times to begin receiving messages of support and eventually the aid they need to reach the end. Though this section of the game is almost purely ludic, it does become a procedural narrative of struggle and eventually success because of these messages. Because the game explicitly lends the player aid through the form of other players' data, they are made to understand the effect their own sacrifice will have on those that finish the game after them. This sense of empathy and identification with others is only possible because the player has participated with the game to construct this procedural narrative and arrive at this point. Furthermore, the game itself acknowledges this participation by openly addressing the player as a player at the end. The game intentionally acknowledges the player's role in actively making decisions and participating in the construction of a narrative in order to draw attention to the vital role that this plays in their identification with other players and identification in general. As

explained in chapter 3, the active, played aspect of games can be used to create identification through the agency created by exploration. By acknowledging the player as a player, *Automata* invites them to broaden their identification beyond the closed off world of the game and apply it to their fellow players.

What this also helps make clear is that the process of experience and play is one of the primary ways games create a sense of identification. *Automata* primes the player for this earlier on by emphasizing 9S and 2B's difference through their combat abilities and perception then drives the point home at the very end with this closing credits sequence. Though *Automata* emphasizes this point and even directly addresses the player about it, this is again an ability all games share. The act of play in and of itself can be a powerfully identificatory experience as the player comes to understand and feel connected to their avatar by seeing inscribing their ludic actions with meaning gleaned from the game's narrative.

As mentioned earlier, the ludic gameplay differences between 9S and 2B are one of the primary ways that *Automata* makes the personality differences distinct while also allowing the player to form a unique sense of identification with both. Similarly, by forcing the player to face unbeatable odds during the end credit sequence before presenting them with messages of support and eventually the aid of other players the game is able to make the player understand that their sacrifice is necessary in order to allow others to reach the ending they just achieved. The impossibility of making it through the credits alone emphasizes the necessity of receiving aid from other players and thus puts the player into an identificatory relationship with those who have already

sacrificed their data. The player gets to see their messages and then receive their help after struggling against impossible odds, and thus knows that their own sacrifice will both encourage future players to keep going and then help them towards the end once they do. The player is only allowed to leave a message of support after volunteering to sacrifice their save data, again emphasizing the experiential aspect and emphasis of this ending. The player's legacy then only exists to other players as their data helps others reach the end or as their message of encouragement assures the player that they will reach their goal if they just keep playing. This ending effectively bridges the gap between the virtual world of the game and the real world of the player's experience and transforms both into an all-encompassing system of identification and empathy created by the experience of *Automata's* procedural narrative.

I have spent so much time on describing an entirely new game in this conclusion in part because I want to give an indication of how my research could be used going forward outside of the limited realm of vRPGs like *Mass Effect* or *The Witcher 3*. *Automata* itself barely qualifies as a vRPG by these standards, the player has no control over 2B or 9S's appearance or background, there is not a traditional leveling or experience system, and the player makes only rarely makes impactful dialogue choices. However it still manages to build an incredibly powerful sense of identification through its procedural narrative and the sense of agency and exploration it lends the player. It merges spatial exploration and narrative exploration in order to emphasize the importance of play and experience in identification in games. As mentioned earlier, the procedural aspect of procedural identification was always intended as a nod to the importance that

play itself has in the unique formal qualities of games as a medium. Just as films are fundamentally visual, games are fundamentally played and this aspect of play should always be centered in the analysis of games.

Finally, I decided to combine the concepts of procedurality and identification because though both are incredibly well theorized in games, I do not believe the two had been brought together adequately before. Bogost's remarks about how procedurality impacts every level of a game and the comments from Shaw's interviewees about experiences forming the backbone of their identification with the player character were, to me, two incredibly rich veins of theoretical exploration that were begging to be combined. Both spoke to something fundamental about games as a medium, Bogost to their procedural, algorithmic nature and Shaw to the importance of play, and I believe that combining the two as I have done in this thesis leads to a deeper understanding of how games create, develop and satisfy a desire for identification.

Ultimately, I believe that what I have described here can go on to be applied to games as an entire medium and not just to vRPGs. *Nier: Automata* closes this thesis both to foreground the importance of doing theoretical analysis through formal analysis and to demonstrate how procedural identification can be applied outside of traditional vRPGs. The underlying procedurality of games means that they are always already capable of structuring the player's identificatory experience procedurally. Ultimately, procedural identification is meant to communicate that game are an active, played medium that interact with the player in ways that can escape their understanding in the immediacy of the moment. As the player navigates the story of the game, their identification becomes



structured around the decisions they make, the things they choose to do, and the ways in which the game procedurally responds to the player's agency.

Games are unique in their ability to actively and immediately respond to the player's agency and thus steadily guide the play in building towards a sense of identification. Although traditional roleplaying elements are by far one of the best ways in which this can be accomplished, they are not strictly necessary or can be broken up and reused in unique, creative ways. As games grow and mature as a medium, many of these generic constraints are loosened while the boundaries become blurry. Games are ultimately spaces where hundreds if not thousands of systems interact simultaneously, meaning they are incredibly open to experimentation and modification. These qualities of video games continue to make them an incredibly exciting, constantly surprising medium in which new avenues and new methods for bringing together procedurality and identification can and will be found.

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## CONCLUSION NOTES

<sup>150</sup> Rehak, "Playing at Being".

<sup>151</sup> Alex Ray Corriea, "Drakengard, Nier director discusses methods for telling powerful, strange stories", *Polygon*. 20 March 2014.

<sup>152</sup> All of the F-Z endings are explained in a sort of intertitle with text and sometimes a simple image rather than the fully animated, diegetic A-E endings.

<sup>153</sup> Galloway, *Gaming*.

<sup>154</sup> Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, 65.

<sup>155</sup> Wendy Chun, *Programmed Visions*, 53.

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