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A Theory of Participation:
Joining the Cast of *Heavy Rain*

By

Matthew Bryan Oliver

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A Theory of Participation: Joining the Cast of *Heavy Rain*

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This alternate plan paper has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee.

Kirsti Cole (Advisor)

Abstract

Video game scholars have gone through an arduous process of defining video games as their own art form that communicates to its audience in as different a way to other art forms as they to each other. This article compiles much of this research and engages in a ludonarrative analysis of *Heavy Rain* to show that video games offer a unique narrative structure where players step vicariously into the positions of video game characters and create their own story through that interactive relationship. *Heavy Rain*, specifically, uses an innovative system of controller mechanic interaction and visual cues to encourage this transformative performance and challenges players and game developers to further the interactive power of the game narrative.

Overview

Performing a *Google* search today with the initial phrase “video games will” produces several recommendations based on contemporary search trends. The top four are, in order: never be art, save the world, ruin your life, and rot your brain. This is telling, though it is also interesting that ‘save the world’ used to be the fourth only fifteen months prior and is now the second. The last decade’s arguments held that some are concerned that players of video games, especially children, are being negatively changed by the games and being instructed to act differently than they might otherwise. Opponents to the concern vehemently argue that there is no such impact on the player. As an avid gamer and aspiring scholar of narrative, I would offer a third perspective. With the inception of new interactive film style video games, players *are* urged to change; they are placed into the intellectual and emotional space of the characters they control. Players are not only stepping into the role of characters but are unconsciously *becoming* them as they explore an ever-developing narrative with which they are inescapably tied. For

opponents of video games due to potential violent outbreaks, an increase of player engagement may initially appear to be a point of contention, except for a significant point. The right game development choices combined with the unification of player and content made possible by the interactive film video game can *benefit* the player by enforcing critical thinking, empathy, and even the other side of violence.

Each video game offers a varying ability to connect with the characters a player controls. With the development of role-playing video games (RPGs) in the early 1980's, players took over the role and body of the hero. In such games, the player becomes that heroic entity and adopts the role in order to accomplish the quest of the game. Often, protagonists are developed in such a way that they cannot contradict the player's self. Heroes are silent and often illustrated androgynously. It is easy to step into heroic roles when the hero has no dialogue to contradict the player's own thoughts. Similarly, modern voice-acted and graphic intensive games often do what they can to limit the distance between the player and character. Players may be allowed to create and customize an avatar's appearance and select behavior traits such that the heroes more closely resemble the player (or at least how the player wishes to appear). In each of these games, while the controlled characters have dialogue options, they are chosen by the player. In effect, the player still has the full illusion of control over the character which results in a still-diminished contradiction between character and player psyche.

Interactive films, however, do not allow such free customization; they present new innovation and new challenges both for developers and players. The interactive film video game is a specialized RPG that has been coming out since 2010. These games, with titles like *Heavy Rain*, *Beyond: Two Souls*, *The Last of Us*, and games running parallel to film and other media like *Jurassic Park* and *The Walking Dead*, invite players to take on the role of particular

characters and, through a unique arrangement of gameplay, work their way through fully written, voice-acted stories that play out just like a movie with the exception that the player is deciding which routes the narrative might take in a manner that is similar to *Choose Your Own Adventure*¹ novels. This is not all that is at stake for the player of an interactive film, however. The narrative of an interactive film video game is not static as in a film or novel but neither is it so easily pliable as in the *Choose Your Own Adventures*. Instead, the interactive film is a contemporary genre of video game where a narrative is conveyed by and through the interaction of the player.

The very innovation that makes the interactive film video game unique and enriching poses a significant challenge, however, in that players must still be able to unite with the character they control. Like other art forms, after all, there is no gain if audiences do not walk away with a lasting, meaningfully engaged interpretation established through their interaction. Unlike RPGs of the past, where silent protagonists present few chances to contradict player ideals, these newer games have fully designed characters with rich backgrounds and specific personalities. Interactive film video games ask that players occupy the space of these different characters and where we might naturally assume that it would be troubling for players to do so, various tactics utilized by game developers may allow players to bond in new ways as the game narrative evolves. *Heavy Rain* is one such game.

¹ A series of childrens' novels published by Bantam Books, written from a second-person point of view, that are often referred to as *gamebooks*. In the novels, readers assumed the role of the protagonist and were guided to making choices about what actions the protagonist would take, ultimately resulting in one of many possible endings.



Fig. 1. Heavy Rain videogame cover art. *IGN*; ign.com, n.d.; Web; 01 Apr 2015.

In *Heavy Rain*, the player takes on the role of four different characters each of whom are working to solve the case of an insidious murderer, the Origami Killer. Ethan Mars is a father, suffering from agoraphobia and grief, whose boy, Shaun, has been taken by the serial killer. Ethan must work through and survive various horrific trials in his attempt to find Shaun before he is killed. Madison Paige is a young photojournalist, suffering from insomnia and nightmares, who seeks to investigate the Origami Killer both to help Ethan and make her career. Norman Jayden is a young FBI agent with a strong morale code but also an addiction both to drugs and the ARI, a futuristic AI technology he uses in investigations that has a potentially fatal effect on his psychology. Scott Shelby is an asthmatic private investigator and former police officer attempting to help the families of victims put their lives back together. Through the game, players control these four, one at a time, in various chapters where they may investigate clues, fight with antagonists, talk to other characters, or otherwise confronting a variety of obstacles, many of which can result in any of their demise and all of which may drastically change the outcome of both the plot of the game as well as the narrative of the video game.

While many interactive film video games offer varying aspects of these tactics, Quantic Dream's *Heavy Rain* does so in an incredibly tangible way, such that it serves as an ideal

example; it demonstrates a game-to-player relationship that subtly bonds the player with the controlled characters. Through implementation of specialized game mechanics such as use of visual effects that mirror character experiences and complex or time-sensitive on-screen-prompted controller combinations, *Heavy Rain* creates a partnership with its players such that they become a participant rather than a spectator in a narrative that evolves through the player's interaction.

Review of Literature

We first have to understand that a video game's narrative is the experience the player has through the actual playing of the game; it is not only the written storyline that is expressed through a game's on-screen dialogue, voice-over, or film-like presentation. Simply put: a video game's narrative is not the plot. The gameplay experience for the gamer is decided by a team of developers who invent methods for the player to proceed through the game's content. The player-to-game interaction comes through in two ways: output to the player in the form of video and audio sensations and input from the player in the form of the game's controller mechanics. A controller mechanic is a physical function a player enters into a game controller, a wired or wireless sort of remote control for the gaming console. These functions can be simplistic, such as pressing a direction pad to the right or tapping a labeled button, or complex, such as pressing a series of buttons in particular order, pressing them slowly, quickly, hard, or soft, or other such nuanced combinations. Developers script the video games to interpret each of these commands as game effects which correspond to the appropriate visual, aural, or even tactile² sensations.

This programming is not a one-way street, however, as the controller input not only manipulates

² Contemporary gaming consoles like the Xbox 360, Xbox One, and Playstation 3 and 4 have moving parts in the controller that will spin or vibrate based on game output. This vibrating controller feedback provides another method of engaging the player's senses.

the video game effects but the game gives sensory inquiries to provoke the player to respond with the appropriate controller command. The combination of on-screen cues and controller mechanics is how video games often teach players how to play the game as well as train them for more complicated scenarios. This pairing creates the video game experience and, for many games, the video game narrative.

The Ludonarrative

Scholars step in to acknowledge and explain how video game narrative can be analyzed. Games do not function in a way that is typical of conventional narratives. The different manner that game narrative is established may be a primary reason for its long history of failing to be categorized as art, though such a history has precedent. Film, too, originally felt the sting of being judged by a literary definition of art. Over time and study, scholars discovered that film operated under a different set of linguistics and needed to be critiqued as its own form. (Imagine if we attempted to discuss a painting, sculpture, or musical performance exclusively using language associated with literary criticism; how long would any such art be called *art* under such faulty perception?) Video games are similarly in their infancy of analysis. It is fruitless to attempt to discuss a video game's narrative elements in the same terms used to analyze a novel or film. In his article, "The Videogame as Narrative," Scott Brendan Cassidy explains:

Videogames are an audiovisual, time-based medium, similar to film and television, and much of their early study was conducted from a film-studies perspective. However, many found this to be a shaky foundation. In an effort to define an alternative to a narrative approach, Gonzao Frasca proposed the term ludology ... to refer to 'a discipline that studies game and play activities.' The

term caught on and now functions as the word most often used to describe those who analyze videogames as *games*. (292-3)

However it is not enough to have a word for the *study of videogames* as a single term does not fully capture the way narrative functions differently within the new medium. Cassidy further touches on this, stating, “a collaborative viewer-author is narrating through their interaction with the videogame, in effect writing a part of the plot of the videogame as it happens” (297). It is the gameplay interaction that generates the majority of the lasting narrative to the player and defines precisely how that narrative will form. The *playing* of the game, not the plot, is the lasting story.

The fact that the videogame-to-player narrative is not the plotline commonly called ‘narrative’ in other art forms does not suggest that games cannot have those conventional narratives. Many do possess core narrative elements such as a recognizable plot, characters, and settings. *Heavy Rain*, after all, is a *story* and its very real characters and the dramatic tension of their attempts to solve a murder would make it a potentially powerful film were it crafted in that medium. However, the academic inquiry of a video game’s artistic contributions cannot depend on those conventional elements of ‘story’ because they are not where the true narrative of a videogame resides—not in the case of *Super Mario*, not in *The Legend of Zelda*, and not in *Heavy Rain*. In his book, *Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter*, Tom Bissell speaks of multiple forms of narrative in a video game. He states, “One is the framed narrative of the game itself, set in the fictional ‘present’ and traditionally doled out in what are called cut scenes or cinematics, which in most cases take control away from the gamer, who is forced to watch the scene unfold” (36-7). This is also what Craig A. Lindley refers to as the initial “discourse level” in his article, “The Semiotics of Time Structure in Ludic Space as a Foundation for Analysis and Design.” Both their diction already suggests a negative break to the gaming experience as the player is

forced to comply to the game's plot with their control having been removed and existing only on the most basic level of game narrative. Games may often change dynamically during cutscenes which can break the experience in the same way that a sudden commercial break in the midst of a theatre experience might disrupt a movie-goer's experience of a film narrative. The negative connotation may be deserved as the scholarship suggests the real value of games reside in another narrative aspect. Bissell continues:

The other, which some game designers and theoreticians refer to as the “ludonarrative,” is unscripted and gamer-determined—the “fun” portions of the “played” game—and usually amounts to some frenetic reconception of getting from point A to point B. The differences between the framed narrative and the ludonarrative are what make story in games so unmanageable: One is fixed, the other is fluid, and yet they are intended ... to work together. (37).

In other words, the complication that many have found in attempting to analyze video games is from being too focused on discussing what has been conventionally defined as narrative. This is where Cassidy and Bissell both argue that new tools must be wielded. Cassidy remarks:

While most modern videogames have recognizable protagonists whose avatars we control, many do not. For example, there is definitely no character to identify with in Tetris (1985). However, as Jesper Juul points out, a character is ‘always present—it is the player’ ... therefore, the only protagonist in any videogame narrative is in fact the player. Ultimately, that the player is both collaborative author and protagonist means that the videogame is a very distinct form of narrative” (296).

Bissell agrees, stating:

The best we can ever hope for, with a narrative game, is to get there. We can't go beyond it using the tools of film or literature or any other authored narrative approach. The question is, can we go beyond it, way beyond it, to completely different realms, by using tools that are inherent to games? To let the player play the story, tell his own story, and have that story be deep and meaningful? (156-7).

These tools are the realm of the ludonarrative. It is the reason that, when playing virtually any video game, a player does not say, "Link is going to solve this puzzle, fight Ganon, and work with Zelda to save Hyrule." The player says, "*I* am going to do these things." This is the reason that protagonists are typically designed in such a way that they will not contradict player thought or identity because the ludonarrative is scripted by the experience of the player joining into the game and forging their own independent instance of story where the player is solving the puzzle and growing ever frustrated by the particular ways a dungeon boss fights. By exploring the choices players make (and implicitly the decisions the developers have allowed players access to), we are able to better delve into what narrative a game constructs and what to what degree players ultimately author that narrative.

The question remains, though, how a player ever can hope to participate in the crafting of a game's ludonarrative without the direction of the videogame developer. The player is trained to recognize, respond, and adapt to the gameplay, but learning how to play *requires* gameplay. Literature and film has a slight analogy to this in that the first chapter or sequence of either narrative likely establishes various expectations and rules for the experience the spectator is about to experience. Video games must do this, too, however they have an additional challenge in that they must educate the player on how to even begin the beginning. They must first teach the player the language of the game.

The Videogame Linguistic System

Games interact with their players with an invented language system where the controller functions, button presses, on-screen symbols, and other images or interactions collide to create particular meanings which are taught to the player through the process of playing the game.

Lindley speaks to this as another level of game narrative in ludic space:

Beneath the simulation level³ is the level of the *generative substrate*, the system of functions, rules and constraints constituting a space of possible worlds of experience created by the designers of the game. In the traditional semiotics of verbal and written language these distinctions may be equated in terms of the discourse level corresponding with speech ... and the generative substrate corresponding with the system of a language ... Narrative theory posits semantic levels including the diegesis or story... (par 12).

In conventional narrative, Lindley's generative substrate is the level of semiotics: the sign and signifier, the meaning of the language at work. In his book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, John Paul Gee gives more insight into how semiotics intersect with video games. He defines semiotic domains as "any set of practices that recruit one or more modalities (e.g., oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artifacts, etc.) to communicate distinctive types of meanings" (19). In video games and Lindley's discussion, the semiotics at work are the coding that generates the rest of the gameplay and also begins the manner in which players are able to interact with the game at all. Through

³ Lindley's levels of ludic space consist of the 'discourse level,' where the plot is revealed, the 'performance level,' which closely resembles the interacted-upon ludonarrative, the 'simulation level,' which is occasionally seen as the illusion of control gamers experience in a video game environment. This third level is the experience of the game universe but only in as far as developers allow. The illusion or simulation comes where players feel as though they have complete choice in the narrative where obviously events can only occur so far as developers have created content (par 11).

the gameplay, players learn the language system through developing a relationship between a controller mechanic or visual cue and a representative action or meaning in the same way we establish meaning between the image of an apple and the *word* ‘apple.’ For gamers, pressing right on a control pad has the representative meaning: move my character to the right. Lindley uses the conventionally accepted term *move* to describe the gamer-to-gameplay relationship:

A *move* within a game is an abstraction over player action, mapping action to a specific significance within the rule set independently of local, personal and idiosyncratic variations in performance; a move is a connotation of a physical or simulated action allowed and facilitated by the framing of the game ... Hence a player performs actions having conventional connotations as he moves within the formal system of the game. Those actions are likely to be highly stylized according to the game ... (par 22).

Since each game will operate differently, with different objectives, characters, and formats, the above example of pressing right on a control pad may not always mean the same thing. More advanced games likely make use of analog sticks rather than buttons—these joysticks make for easier movement controls and, thus, the control pad is likely reserved for different moves. More complicated moves require a combination of different controller function interactions. In *Heavy Rain*, the combination of all these controller mechanics form much of the game’s language system, but only part.

While the game teaches the player a correlation between a particular controller mechanic and resulting character actions, players must also have something to interact *upon*. In-game cues, whether visually displayed on-screen icons or aural stimuli, represent the next portion of the videogame’s linguistic system. In the same way that ‘*apple*’ means *apple* and ‘*pressing right*

on the control pad means *moving right*, none of the sign relationships mean anything if they do not result in an actual performance. The apple, when seen, must be eaten, planted, or admired for its doctor-banishing power for its meaning to be fulfilled. The right-ward movement, similarly, means nothing if the game does not offer a reason for a right-movement to be performed. The game does, however, communicate this need through on-screen cues that convey to the player the need for that move to be performed. The performance has to result in progress towards the video game experience for its meaning to matter. In *Heavy Rain*, these on-screen cues make up the bulk of the choice and player interaction. Icons will appear on screen in strategic locations. Through the comprehension of the ever-establishing linguistic system, players can recognize that an icon displayed over a particular environment indicates that pressing the corresponding button will cause the character to interact with that object. The combination of the action and the impetus to act, especially in early stages of the game, are how game developers teach the player how to play. As the game continues and interactions become more complicated, the game offers additional clues so that player can respond. Gee demonstrates this in his book:

The child was able to think about and comment on [changes in tone and scenery in *Pikmin*]. He said that the music was now “scary” and the landscape much harsher-looking ... He knew this signaled that things were going to get harder ...

What we are dealing with here is talking and thinking about the (internal) design of the game, about the game as a complex system of interrelated parts meant to engage and even manipulate the player in certain ways. This is metalevel thinking, thinking about a game as a system and a designed space.

Such thinking can open up critique of the game. It can also lead to novel moves and strategies, sometimes ones that the game makers never anticipated. (34-5).

As the player becomes further fluent in the language of the gameplay, not only do they better learn how to play the basic game, but they are able to devise further tactics to interact with the game environment. Performing the above right-movement initially means that the narrative of the game is of exploration. The character is moving along the ground, witnessing more of the world, and observing what may populate it. This may involve enemies or objectives depending on the type of game being played. In a side-scrolling, two-dimensional platform jumping game, players will discover increasing complexity if there are suddenly obstacles on the *left* that force them to move to the right consistently or quickly. In Gee's example, visual and auditory cues inform the player that the situation is dire and the performances that the player has become accustomed to must now be complicated and may result in a more dramatic consequence for failure to do so. This increasing tension distracts the player from the tactical language of interaction by making the functions more subliminal. Consider how films perform this effect on an audience: when the plotline moves into a more desperate position, just like in the *Pikmin* example that Gee provides, music, colors, and lighting effects are changed to give the spectator the sense of increased drama even while not specifically calling attention to those changes. In the best examples, these cinematographic shifts have a subliminal impact on the tension of the audience. The viewer does not likely remember the shifting music and lighting as why they became more tense; they associate this with the changing narrative. Where the same cinematographic changes in a film would intensify an audience's stakes of the narrative, these similar changes in a videogame do not change the plot or character but the *player's* experience and perception of the actual gameplay. The stakes are both raised, but in the videogame, the

greater focus of the increasing tension translates directly into the ludonarrative and away from the system from which the ludonarrative is created.

As the player becomes more involved in the gameplay, the player naturally spends less time consciously thinking about the *mechanics* of playing the game. Imagine the difference between going to a theatre to watch a movie where the seats are squeaky, the audience is noisy, the screen is dirty, and other such factors that remind a spectator that they are in a theatre versus a seamless viewing where the spectator is more completely drawn into the film. The manner in which the player can “forget” the mechanics of play by placing it into the player’s unconscious is directly related to a player’s immersion. *Heavy Rain* reinforces the same immersive sense in the way that consistent actions are no longer presented on screen and are acted upon as if by second nature—as though the player has become fluent in some portions of the game’s linguistic system.

Forging One’s Own Narrative

If a game is well developed, players may be able to acquire this fluency with greater ease, shortening the learning curve and allowing the game to move into more in depth levels sooner. Through careful development of the game, designers can teach the players how to play the game and inform the players of the mood of the world they are about to explore without ever halting the player’s immersion into the game itself. By incorporating nuanced gameplay elements into tutorial sequences, players may discover the semiotic connection of controller functions, character actions, and on-screen representations through what appear to be only curious exploration. Just like genre conventions in film and novel, video game developers often rely on similar semiotic controller standards. Upon acquiring the literacies required for the successful completion of one adventure game, players may discover that the same literacy translates easily to other adventure games. Lindley expands on his discussion of *moves* to note that these, like

gaining specialization in genre-based linguistic systems, expand to increasingly complex comprehension of the more complex moves. He explains, “Learning to play a game, making progress within a game and completing or winning a game are matters of learning how to interact within the game system and its rules in a way that supports progress. This is a matter ... of learning a *game-play gestalt*, understood as a *pattern of moves* within the game system” (par 23). He goes on to illustrate how these patterns can be specialized into tactics, and patterns of tactics may then become strategies that are shared through social collectives to use across many similar genres of games. The process of grouping small moves into more complex systems of meaning is exactly reflective of the way that language is arranged as per semiotic theory. Each component of meaning builds upon each other: words like moves, sentences like broad mechanics, paragraphs like tactics, the collective strategy of a game decided on by its player becomes its own narrative as though it were a novel, and the sharing of these strategic conventions through online forums and multiplayer gameplay becoming the very generic conventions in which wider literature is often published.

Through examination of the inherent connection of video game linguistics and the player-formed strategies, we can see that games possess internal ludonarratives whether alongside or even bereft of conventional narrative components. In his article, “Bridging the Narratology-Ludology Divide. The *Tetris* Case,” Jack Post makes the insightful argument that *Tetris* not only possesses a narrative but one that can be analyzed. Post depends on existing ludological and semiotic theory to illustrate that the player becomes a character whose goal is to manipulate chaos into order. He writes, “The ‘simple narrative’ of Tetris can be analyzed as a base Narrative Program (NP) which consists of several sub-programs (instrumental NP) which are necessary for the realization of the NP” (32). While complicated, what Post is stating is that the

player must work through several moves in order to position the *Tetris*-blocks into a line. This will not complete the full objective, however, because the player must complete the sub-objective several times and in different variations to proceed to increasing difficulties. He reiterates, “The schema of the quest is not just a conflict between two actants over an object, but it always implies the transfer and definition of the values which give meaning to the trajectory of the subject. The quest schema puts two couples of actants into play (Sender and the Receiver, and subject and object) [with] each its own narrative” (33). Despite *Tetris* being merely a puzzle game based on aligning blocks into a pattern, there is a decisive interaction at work in how the player will move, place, or even reject the blocks.

If the artistic power of a narrative comes from an audience’s interaction and personal interpretation with that art and the ludonarrative in a video game is created through the literal gameplay as discovered through learning how to interact, it follows that any engaged gameplay creates its own narrative. Through the interactions that players make through each level of a variety of video games, the player is engaging with that developing narrative. Warfare games place players in fields of battle with war-torn debris that players must avoid or make use of in order to survive. This becomes the story of the soldier-player’s struggle. Adventure games graphically present characters in the midst of dangerous enemies and on-screen power-ups such that they must always be aware of their surroundings as the narrative develops. The creatures encountered reveal their characterization through their appearances, movements, and often whether or not spikes shoot out of them when the player approaches.

In an RPG, despite usually having a more conventional narrative plot developing alongside the gameplay, it is the particular actions the player makes in fighting the antagonists and which social options they choose that make up the meat of the engaged story. Irrelevant of

the scripted plot, it is the player's experiences that matter and such importance is clearly demonstrated in well-developed video games. Gee explains how *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation* offers a honed tutorial phase such that players both have access to the plot and access an understanding of how to engage with the controller mechanics all while becoming engaged with the developing ludonarrative. Explaining a scene in which Lara is being instructed to follow her mentor's exacting instructions, Gee illustrates that the player is not only not required to do so but is manipulated by the tutorial to explore the player's own whims:

The game encourages the player not to be too deferential to Von Croy ... even though [he] has told Lara to stay close ... the only way the player can find hidden treasure ... is to wander away from him and explore things a bit. In fact, as Von Croy is commanding Lara to stay close, a willful player is probably looking behind a group of pillars to see if they hide anything interesting. (116-7).

Through asserting the player's own will, one is able to craft their own story that would certainly be more memorable than simply following the tutorial progression from start to finish. It is the events of the gameplay that hold any lasting meaning.

Ludonarrative Analysis of *Heavy Rain*

Heavy Rain possesses a rich, thrilling mystery plot and complex characters who undergo change and growth. It could have been written as a novel or produced as a film and today's scholars might be analyzing its narrative through conventional theory. It is a game, however, and any plot that might be written would mean nothing without the active engagement of the player, without whose decisions the game would have neither ending, middle, nor beginning. With each sequence, the player is exposed to increasingly intensified story and gameplay

moments and is called to action each time. The actions performed will shape whether the character survives the sequence, *how* the character has survived, and ultimately defines what ending—what very narrative—the player has crafted within the game.

Heavy Rain establishes the player as a cast member in a narrative that is changed through the player's interaction. *Heavy Rain* utilizes intuitive controller mechanics that mirror the characters and situations in which the player discovers oneself. The controller mechanics can be identified as having a mechanic-to-event or mechanic-to-emotion relationship all of which bind the player to the controlled character in nuanced ways. As the two mechanical relationships have an impact on the player, the player is ultimately drawn to become a participant in the narrative by vicariously experiencing the events and simulating their emotions due to the mechanical controls. The player exists in multiple places and performs multiple functions. Gee defines these multiple performances through an explanation of the variety of identities which players create while playing video games:

A third identity that is at stake in playing [well developed games] is what I will call a *projected identity*, playing on two sense of the word “project,” meaning both “to project one’s values and desires onto the virtual character” ... and “seeing the virtual character as one’s own project in the making, a creature whom I imbue with a certain trajectory through time defined by my aspirations for what I want that character to be and become ... (50).

In many other games, players can form a hybrid of the character being controlled through the game's narrative and their own ambitions as a player. Gee expresses this hybrid entity as projecting the player's aspirations on the part of the character. Due to the special mirroring mechanics at work in *Heavy Rain*, however, the character aspirations can just as easily be

projected to the player. These facts merge to cause players to make narrative decisions that may accurately reflect how the characters would respond were they genuine beings. Through on-screen display and controller functions, players learn how to manipulate the controlled characters through tutorial sequences, but this is no different from any other video game. *Heavy Rain*'s tutorial sequences also begin the formation of player engagement with the events through a control scheme that mirrors the events in the game. As *Heavy Rain*'s chapters continue and the game becomes more complicated, these same mechanics are utilized in more complex ways, thus compounding the semiotic engagement that Gee has explained. Since players are placed into the same psychic place as the character they control, thanks to simulating their actions and experiences, they become intrinsically bound to the choices they are making through the gameplay. Even if the ludonarrative was not already a significant factor in the developing narrative of a videogame—which scholars have already done the work to prove true—the player's semiotically formed bond with the characters ensure that they will experience and evolve *Heavy Rain*'s narrative in a highly personal way. It is possible to observe the impact of player interaction on both the evolving narrative and the player's state through the gameplay, though the overt analysis is most clearly seen by comparing mechanically similar but disparately intense moments between the four characters. An extensive exploration into each of the characters and how engagement is differently applied to each could be performed at length, though it is most simplistic to demonstrate the relationship through a focused examination of Ethan Mars, whose actions most clearly impact the most significant plot point in whether Shaun can be saved from the killer, as juxtaposed to scenes featuring the other three.

Learning to Play

To first understand the way *Heavy Rain* establishes a connection with the player and thus begins to forge the developing narrative, we have to understand how the player interacts with the game through visual cues and controller interaction (see fig. 2).



Fig. 2. PS3 controller diagram. GamingWithDaOpa, 2013; Web; 29 Mar 2015.

In order to move each character and interact with their environments, the player uses buttons, analog joystick movements, and motion-detection technology. Movement is controlled by the left analog stick and the *R1* button. Any manipulation of the left analog stick causes the controlled character to look or turn in the direction signified. At any time the *R1* button is depressed, the character will move forward. Combining these two mechanics can cause the character to move to desired locations (see fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Movement tutorial of *Heavy Rain*. Gameplay capture; 06 Apr 2015.

The other buttons and right analog stick are designated to simple, complex, compound, and dialogue actions. For simple actions, for example, a player may move the right analog stick upwards and to the left in order to open up curtains and let light into the room. The controller motion approximates the actual motion that a person might make in the living world. For more complex actions, the player may be required to press and hold a series of buttons without releasing any.



Fig. 4. Ethan climbs through a barbed wire fence. Gameplay capture; 06 Apr 2015.

As an example, the player is required to press and hold in place the *Up* directional button, then *R1*, then *R2*, and finally *Square* in order to lift up a broken segment of a barbed wire fence, carefully step through, and then release the cut metal without injuring the controlled character (see fig. 4). Certainly, the controller manipulations here do not mirror the actual signified activity; however the series of motions *do* approximate the *difficulty* of the action. The player must hold the controller in an awkward (and even slightly painful) angle in order to hold all four buttons depressed. Even more difficult compound actions may require greater awkward angles performed with a single hand. Lastly, for physical or urgent actions, a player may be required to move the entire controller, shaking it or violently jerking it. Such motions are typically reserved

for violent actions, such as in the many combat scenes that Norman Jayden must survive through, though the game must first train the player in how to enact these motions. In his introductory scene, Ethan Mars is in his bathroom getting ready for the day. In order to brush his teeth, the player must shake the controller from side to side and up and down to make Ethan brush his teeth horizontally and then vertically. After his shower, the player must shake the controller up and down to cause Ethan to dry his hair with a towel. The physical motions or controller functions that the player makes all are designed to imitate the physical activities of the characters being controlled. These basic controls are the first step in casting the player into *Heavy Rain*.

Bonding With the Characters

Because the player mechanics align with the character actions, the player is being placed in the same psychic space as the character that they are controlling. Not only is the gameplay immersive, but it is mechanically bonding the player to the character being controlled and further forming the ludonarrative. For simple scenes such as getting Ethan ready in the morning or having Scott make eggs for Lauren or feeding and burping her baby, there is no specific tension involved and the actions are things that the player has likely done in real life. Thus, the approximate actions that seem similar to everyday activities easily allow the player to identify with the character and come closer to adopting the character's perspective on what they are doing. It is as though the player's unconscious is noticing something that it has already performed many times and, through a sort of reverse transference, the unconscious mind tells the conscious mind, "This is just like me."

With players identifying with the domestic and common qualities, *Heavy Rain* can expand into unlikely scenarios in a way that furthers the narrative without too jarringly disrupting the player from their bond in the cast. *Heavy Rain*'s narrative is about common folk pursuing a serial killer and striving to survive in life-threatening trials, however, so while the players find themselves in situations that are drastically different from thematic events they would likely otherwise explore, immersion would possibly be lost except for *Heavy Rain*'s development strategies: in particularly desperate, urgent, or complicated scenarios, the onscreen prompts that guide a player to move the character become more difficult to read or require faster responses. *Heavy Rain* must also ensure that players are united with the controlled characters emotional state. Mirroring their physical interactions with the mechanic-to-event structure now expands to include a mechanic-to-character-emotion relationship in order to mirror character *stress* in addition to situational complexity. While specific controller functions may be identical, the manner in which they are displayed changes based on the content explored. Engaging in a playful sword fight with Ethan's children at the start of the game involve the same motion control as attempting to keep Norman Jayden safe from Mad Jack's lead pipe attack—you must press the associated buttons in the proper timing—but where Ethan's icons have a solid and static white appearance, Jayden's icon vibrates (see figs. 5 and 6). The shaking icon represents Jayden's fear of being killed by Mad Jack and is notably more difficult to read than the exact same icon from Ethan's chapter because his survival sequence has much more at stake than Ethan's. While the button presses require the same amount of *time* for player input, the increased stress of identifying the proper button to press (and the anxiety from the narrative situation) drives the player into the mindset of the threatened character. Ethan might risk

embarrassment at loosing a game to his children, but Jayden will *certainly* die if he does not get out of Mad Jack's swing.



Fig. 5. Ethan and Jason sword fight in the yard.
Gameplay capture; 05 Apr 2015.



Fig. 6. Jayden dodges an attack from Mad Jack.
Gameplay capture; 06 Apr 2015.

The tension of the scene may already drive the player into a deep immersion simply through emotional conflict, but the controller mechanics demand *immersion* instead of distancing the player from the game. The player is experiencing a similar sort of conflict as Jayden. Neither are likely saying anything out loud, but each are likely asking the same question: “What do I do?” Jayden needs to escape a large killer and the player, really, needs to do the same thing. Both experience nervousness, anxiety, and uncertainty. The similar experience bestowed on the player through the gameplay ensures that the ludonarrative is further defined. As the player is situated in the same emotional space as Jayden, the player's ability to respond is also impacted. Without the emotionally-influenced controls, the player might easily reflect only on the same controller functions necessary to defeat a ten year old in backyard play; this would result in no significant advancement of the ludonarrative. The tension created by the stressful experience of potentially *dying* in a combat scene makes such basic reflection impossible, however, thus the player must make a narrative-impacting action, ideally to keep Jayden alive.

Ethan (and the Player)'s Choice

When complexity and emotion meet, the *Heavy Rain* achieves some of its most significant narrative-impacting moments. The process is best exposed in one of Ethan's later chapters. The scenario is that he is being forced to engage in various physical and mental trials in order to prove to the Origami Killer (and himself) that he genuinely loves his son and would do anything to save him. Finding himself in a worn down apartment room, Ethan is told that he must prove that he is willing to sacrifice himself for his son. A computerized tablet voice tells him, "Are you prepared to suffer to save your son? You have five minutes to cut off the last section of one of your fingers in front of the camera. If you succeed, you will your reward." Using conventional cinematographic conventions, the non-diagetic music of the scene becomes terse and dissonant. The *mis-en-scene* (the visual design elements of the frame) is dreary, dirty, isolated. If this were a film, spectators would perhaps gasp or at least identify with Ethan's terror of what is to come, but *Heavy Rain* requires direct interaction on the part of the player and, as stated, Ethan and the player are about to engage in a scene that truly earns its memorable state.

When control is returned to the player after the brief cutscene, the player is now tasked with making a quick and accurate choice without any specific information on *which* choice is correct. The immediacy of the tablet's commands, however, suggests that whichever the player decides is a choice that will certainly have lasting impact on the narrative and further mechanics only deepen this interpretation. Thought bubbles appear around Ethan's head. In the past, when Ethan contemplates taking a shower or whether he should feed his son or make him do his homework first, these bubbles are clear text and move around his head only fast enough to allow the player a sense of no particular priority. Any of them might be the right thing to think and the only reason to choose one over the other is out of personal choice (informed instinctively by the

unconscious, of course). Now, however, the options shake and blur and spiral around his head in chaotic patterns. Even if the player could pause the gameplay (which the player could not and still read the words), the text still reads as blurry and disjointed (see fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Ethan frantically considers his choices. Gameplay capture; 21 Mar 2015.

The player knows that they only have five minutes. While five minutes is actually *plenty* of time to accomplish the task, it *feels* like there is no time. The player must select an option quickly, but the player (like Ethan) wants to select the *right* option *quickly*. The player is now in the same emotional space as Ethan and mistakes are quite possible for both.

Heavy Rain's story does not promise a happy ending and the result of this scene will directly impact how both the story-narrative and ludonarrative conclude. *Heavy Rain* has given enough implicit and direct information to suggest that failing a trial will legitimately result in the player/Ethan failing to receive the information necessary to save Shaun. The player's and Ethan's options are: *impossible*, *no choice*, *instrument*, and *disinfectant* (see fig. 7). Selecting any of these will cause Ethan to think out loud as he attempts to solve his predicament and, thus, give the player possible clues (or red herrings) about the solution. Yet, it is highly likely that the player is already contemplating many of the same thoughts both from a real-world and gaming-

experience perspective. The player needs to find an instrument to cut off a finger. If Ethan is to save his son, he *has* to sever his own finger—there is no option that results in obtaining the information and also not succeeding in the trial. However, the player should be concerned with Ethan's health; not only is the player *Ethan*, but if Ethan does not survive (or lacks the digits necessary for later trials) Shaun is still going to die and, perhaps, the game will be over. Or, perhaps, the player is simply thinking, "No. I am not going to do this." *Heavy Rain* is a graphic game and is not shy about displaying gore. Especially if the player is squeamish, the image and sounds of a man amputating his finger with grimy implements is not going to be a comforting sight. These options continue to reinforce the empathetic bond between the player and Ethan simply by content but, as noted earlier, even if the player is not personally unsure of which option is the 'right' one, the game ensures that the choice is made difficult through the visual distortion. In this way, it is conceivable that the player may misidentify the correct button to press to enact the desired thought. Either way, the controller mechanics further augment what the player already knows, furthering the unification that the player has with Ethan's struggle and ensuring that whichever decision the player makes will have a lasting impact on the ludonarrative.

The setup for such a visceral scene only opens the door for the next, more significant complication to the player's experience and the developing narrative. The player already knows what is coming and the game reinforces the growing tension by making the player move around the room to gather potential implements. As the player and Ethan gather disinfectant and alcohol and various sharp (or cringingly not-so-sharp) items, the timer continues to tick off and the thought bubbles continue to become more chaotic and difficult to read. Ethan's voice trembles if any are selected. And, when they finally sit at the table to perform the deed, Ethan and the

player's options are shaking just as erratically to represent Ethan's anxiety over cutting off a part of his body and, like in a more real world scenario, an uncomfortable number of options exist for an uncomfortable activity which leaves the player further uncertain of what may be the 'right' action. Imbibing alcohol to calm down will reduce the icon's shaking, however imbibing too much will cause the screen to become blurry (see fig. 8). Taking deep breaths to calm down will also reduce the icon's shaking, however takes time and may make those five minutes reduce quite quickly.



Fig. 8. 'Ethan's Choice' is no better than Sophie's, especially when drunk. Gameplay capture; 21 Mar 2015.

'Ethan's Choice' is a balance of anxiety, time, planning, and commitment for both Ethan and the player. The mechanic-to-event or mechanic-to-character-emotion relationship could be enough to bind the player into the characters and narrative events of *Heavy Rain*, but the events that take place are also largely influenced by the player such that the illusion of control present in most narrative-based games is so intensified by the participation of the player that the player's *experience* (and thus the ludonarrative) is entirely, dynamically shifted.

A Narrative Changed Through Interaction

Through the game events of *Heavy Rain*, the player makes several choices that will ultimately determine how the story progresses and entirely shapes the player's experience. In the above scene where Ethan must sever a portion of his finger, the player may actually opt to fail the Origami Killer's challenge (either through failing to act within the five minute time requirement or through the inaction of not wishing to undergo such torture). Should Ethan not accept the trial, he will not receive a portion of the address that ultimately reveals to him where his son is located. It is still possible for the player/Ethan to deduce Shaun's location with an only partial address but it is not certain. Should the player fail *multiple* trials, the likelihood of finding Shaun is almost non-existent. This has a direct affect on which of several possible endings the player will achieve in *Heavy Rain* and is only one set of choices available to one of the four characters.

Each character in *Heavy Rain* meets several scenarios where a game-impacting decision must be made or action successfully completed and the narrative does not cease depending on most of the player's actions. In fact, any (and *all*) of the four characters can even die during the game's events, ultimately only resulting in an oblique conclusion in which the player sees one of the more tragic conclusions where the Origami Killer goes unnamed and Shaun dies. Through various actions and choices, each character offers a component to *Heavy Rain*'s endings with between three to seven alternating possibilities, each, and a composite of seventeen unique conclusions.

This initially seems impressive, but it is all the more so when placed against the impact of narrative in the interactive video game and other genres. Literature and film have the ability to reshape narrative based on a changing audience. If a spectator returns to the same narrative after

a period of time, having changed one's perspective through their own life's experience, the narrative may speak differently. Video games often suffer from a lack of *replayability* as the player's experience on a second play will likely weaken the ludonarrative rather than give a fresh perspective. In *Heavy Rain*, however, a single altered choice may make the original narrative events no longer accessible—it may literally be impossible to experience the same gameplay and thus the ludonarrative *must* change. Even if experiencing one of the same seventeen endings, the filmic nature of *Heavy Rain* makes it possible to experience multiple personal narratives with each individual ending. And, either way, there are no play experiences of *Heavy Rain* that can occur or have any real artistic merit without the choice and interaction of the player.

Continuing the Study of Ludonarrative

Critics against video games warn that playing games will change the player, though they speak of this as a strictly negative change in much the same way that any modern, emerging, or developing genre experiences judgment. The arguments speak to a change occurring through video games as though it is a danger that must be avoided, but *changing people* is what art most *hopefully* accomplishes. Through the experience of reading a well-written novel, listening to inspirational music, observing an impactful piece of visual art, or, yes, playing a well-developed and engaging video game, the audience interacts with content in such a way that they change having experienced something new inside themselves as prompted by the exterior art.

The chief argument that has often been seen is that violent games can inspire violent behavior but, as stated, it can also change our perspectives of violence itself. Yes, violent art including video games may have inspired violent actions, however when art is generated in such a way that the repercussions of such violence is experienced by the audience, a very different

change occurs. The interactive film video game genre, and particularly *Heavy Rain*, demands the players occupy the physical space of its characters. Thus, any depiction of violence against the controlled characters (and player, by proxy) engages the player to empathize with victims rather than idealize the violence. The depth of change that may occur by vicariously experiencing the violence perpetuated on women, such as in Madison Paige's nightmare scene, or the terror observed by viewing the ramifications of gun violence through Mad Jack's aggressiveness are all facets that are well worth additional research and would ultimately offer greater insight into the advantageous changes that video games can offer its players. However, to simply reject a field of art out of *fear* of a hypothetical negative change in the audience wildly weakens the opportunities to experience these other facets of change that all art can encourage.

Heavy Rain achieves much of its beneficial change through inviting the player to step inside four completely different characters, all of whom are struggling to persevere in the face of events that most people will never encounter. Because of its ability to engage with players through physical actions that mirror the events and emotions of these sensational moments, *Heavy Rain* not only invites the player to be a divorced and agoraphobic father struggling to keep a grasp on his last remaining son or an aspiring journalist who cannot get away from her post-traumatic stress, but to evolve and even define what will occur during the narratives of their lives. In what other medium can a human have such involvement in the course of a narrative while still operating within the constraints of a pre-determined art and still walk away feeling changed by the experience? As *Heavy Rain* offers players the opportunity to experience a wide variety of changing, evolving narratives, their experience through the gameplay is made constantly fresh by a potentially limitless degree of varied ludonarratives.

The developer of *Heavy Rain*, Quantic Dream, is not entirely unique in its efforts to present such a dynamic experienced ludonarrative to its players. Each year, additional developers and games continue to press the boundaries of art and interaction and with further technological development and inspired game development. Some of these games follow existing narratives on television and film, allowing players the ability to step inside some of their favorite stories to experience them in a more first-hand and unique way. Others test our personal boundaries, demanding that not only do we step inside a role that we're unfamiliar with but occupy an ideology that may be entirely disparate from our own. Joined by an increasing number of scholars who are willing to look at video games as its own art form deserving of its own system of language and theory, players, developers, and scholars continue to grow in their ability to not only discuss the nuances of video game narrative but generate more engrossing and engaging ways to present it in the first place. As narrative has the ability to expose its audiences to new ideas and increasingly complex games continue to expand the ability for their ludonarratives to reach brand new horizons, there may be little limit to what vicarious experiences may await us and how those evolving narratives might change who we were.

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