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# Points of Reflection: A Case for Moral Engagement Across Video Game Time and Space

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POINTS OF REFLECTION:  
A CASE FOR MORAL ENGAGEMENT ACROSS VIDEO GAME TIME AND SPACE

by

RYAN THAMES

Under the Direction of Greg Smith, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

In the field of video game studies, meaningful action and flow are upheld as primary targets of game design, and key factors in many ontological definitions of what games can and should be. Yet, games are not all action. Within most games one encounters numerous pauses and interruptions of various kinds, including the much-maligned “cut-scenes” that lead or force the player out of an active role at certain moments. Furthermore, not all actions are goal-directed. If they are, they are not necessarily pragmatic. These pauses, interruptions, and nuanced goals are often overlooked, if not actively derided, in the field of game studies. In short, ideas about how players stop and reflect, how their goals and experiences take on emotional and/or moral valences, are under-represented. My work argues that moral reflection does occur even in

mainstream games, and that it tends to happen in connection with the very moments game scholars often overlook—in the pauses before or after actions, in the moments of awe or realization, when the controller has been set down or the keyboard pushed away, and yes, even during cut-scenes. Such moments may invite the player into a state of moral reflection, but for this state of moral reflection to be poignant and memorable to the player these moments must also involve a consideration of differing values. Finally, how a game structures the player's experience of time, from receiving quests to setting out into the game world, from pauses to demanding challenges, and even through the layout of video game spaces lends these points of reflection their crucial impact.

INDEX WORDS: Game studies, Ethics, Temporality, Flow, Values, Role-playing games

POINTS OF REFLECTION:  
A CASE FOR MORAL ENGAGEMENT ACROSS VIDEO GAME TIME AND SPACE

by

RYAN THAMES

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

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2018

POINTS OF REFLECTION:  
A CASE FOR MORAL ENGAGEMENT ACROSS VIDEO GAME TIME AND SPACE

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## **DEDICATION**

I especially want to thank my family, whose constant support has made this possible. Thank you for always believing in me. I'd also like to thank my friends for being around to keep me sane, and for staying my friends from good times through the stressful times when I could rarely get out to see them. Finally, grad school would have been a very lonely experience indeed without the camaraderie of all the smart and wonderful peers in my program. My final push to finish despite numerous setbacks benefitted tremendously from regular meetings with a group of fellow dissertators that my advisor put together to commiserate and brainstorm ideas. Go 'Taters!

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

RPG: Role-playing Game

PC: Player Character

NPC: Non-Player Character

POI: Point of Interest

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The player guides a character through the virtual world searching, slaying, looting, getting caught up in the flow of *action*, and making calculated strategic choices all in pursuit of a pragmatic *goal*. If the player achieves this goal, the outcome is a win; if not, a loss. That is one way of looking at video games, and in fact, it aligns itself with one of the most common points of agreement in the field of video game studies—goal-oriented action as a game’s key feature. Video games are indeed an action medium. They require action to unfold and progress, such that they cannot be experienced completely (if at all) without an active player. It’s easy to see why many prominent game studies theorists (Costikyan, 1994/2006; Frasca, 1999; Juul, 2005; Koster, 2005; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) emphasize how crucial goal-directed action is to the core meaning and operation of a game. Yet, games are not all action. Within most games one encounters numerous pauses and interruptions of various kinds, including the much-maligned “cut-scenes” that lead or force the player out of an active role at certain moments. Furthermore, not all actions are goal-directed. If they are, they are not necessarily pragmatic. There are other goals a player might have instead of, or often in addition to “winning” a game or a segment of a game. These pauses, interruptions, and nuanced goals are often overlooked, if not actively derided, in the field of game studies. In short, ideas about how players stop and reflect, how their goals and experiences take on emotional and/or moral valences, are under-represented.

In the culture at large beyond the field of game studies, video games are often seen as a trivial medium, one that caters only to our baser instincts—violence, sexuality, and greed. Some game scholars (Bogost, 2006; Bogost, 2011; Sicart, 2009; Sicart 2013) believe a degree of moral reflection happens, but primarily in indy games that few people actually play. My work argues that moral reflection does occur in mainstream games, and that it tends to happen in connection

with the very moments game scholars often overlook—in the pauses before or after actions, in the moments of awe or realization, when the controller has been set down or the keyboard pushed away, and yes, even during cut-scenes. Such moments may invite the player into a state of moral reflection, but for this state of moral reflection to be poignant and memorable to the player these moments must also involve a consideration of differing values.

Playing through a game often requires considering an ever-growing number of values attached to objects, settings, events, or characters in the game. Some of these values are discovered and grow over the course of play, some are understood by reference to similar games or media, and some the player brings with him to the game. Beyond those values that help a player understand the game's mechanics and strategically pursue goals of a more pragmatic nature, there are many values with a moral and/or emotional valence. These values can all align more or less smoothly at a particular moment, leading to uncomplicated positions aimed at driving the narrative or gameplay along, or they can differ, leading to a much more poignant state of moral reflection. As a metaphor for the way these values operate, I will employ the term *valuescapes*. In much the same way as a player constructs a rough idea or map of the virtual space over the course of play, the player also constructs a shifting landscape of the values and how and where they interact. These valuescapes considered during moments of moral reflection are, like landscapes, more interesting when they have depth, variance, and/or opposition.

The notion of constructed valuescapes emphasizes that no moment happens out of context. Game studies scholarship tends to emphasize big moments and examples. Yet, it is important to consider not only the most poignant moment but also the context—the pattern of moments that lead to that heightened moment. The power of suddenly stumbling across a waterfall plunging into a deep canyon is inseparable from the trek through the thick forest that

initially obscured the sight. Just as the map of a landscape that we build up in our minds involves numerous features encountered moment by moment, and the distinctiveness of a landscape is considered in relation to other landscapes we have experienced, so it is with valuescapes.

I argue that a state of moral reflection is most prone to occur at moments of pause and interruption, moments where actions in pursuit of a pragmatic goal are arrested, however temporarily. The most poignant moral reflection occurs when such a moment involves a consideration of widely varying and/or contradictory valuescapes. However, to understand that heightened moment, one must also understand the context, the pattern of moments and values leading up to it. I assert that this moral reflection can—and does—occur within many mainstream games, such that scholars do not need to look solely at independent games, persuasive games, or art games to consider morality.

At stake here are a number of prominent conversations within the field of game studies. First, my project seeks to decenter actions and pragmatic win/loss based goals as the key focus of game studies. While I do not wish to supplant or disprove this line of scholarship, I do assert that (for some games at least) moments of reflection are equally important to the experience. By decentering actions and emphasizing reflection and the consideration of moral values, I am also coming into conflict with some other important scholarly positions. My assertion is at odds with those, such as Gonzalo Frasca (1999), who assert that the representational aspects of games are of little importance and that a game's mechanics are its true essence. To attach values to the objects, characters, settings, and events of a game requires some consideration of representational elements (though these are active alongside, rather than supplanting, a game's mechanics). I am also coming up against the line of scholarship that emphasizes (and somewhat

distorts) Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of flow as the key site of pleasurable experience in games (as flow is integrally linked with action).

My project also challenges the idea, held by many, that games (and particularly mainstream games) are ill-equipped to convey emotions and complex morality. The study of emotions and morality in games is a ground trod by few, and the most prominent of these consider it a rare occurrence, largely the province of indy games. While I do not discount the innovative ways such games convey emotion and morality, I look beyond these rarified instances. Moral reflection may occur at many moments in many different games, including the blockbuster games that more people are likely to play. To write off the more heavily played commercial games is to do a disservice both to the medium and to the culture and lives touched by it.

### **1.1 Theories of Action, Choice, Goals, and Morality**

As noted above, scholars such as Frasca (1999), Juul (2005), Salen and Zimmerman (2004), as well as game designers such as Greg Costikyan (1994/2006) and Raph Koster (2005), all emphasize the importance of interesting actions, choices, and goals to the core meaning and operation of a game. Gonzalo Frasca (1999), a prominent ludologist, has an interest in highlighting the rule-oriented (and therefore action/goal-oriented) aspects of games as their defining characteristic, that “*games* have a result: they define a winner and a loser,” and that the critical essence of games, “*Ludus* is... *activity organized under a system of rules that defines a victory or a defeat, a gain or a loss*” (Play and Game section, para. 6, 9). Even scholars with a more general focus, such as Salen and Zimmerman (2004), maintain this emphasis with the importance of action and choice to the creation of meaning in games (p. 33) as well as in their definition of game: “a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules,



that results in a quantifiable outcome” (p. 33). Game designers turned scholars such as Greg Costikyan and Raph Koster also maintain this importance of actions and goals. Costikyan (1994/2006) declares that “a game is a form of art in which participants, termed players, make decisions in order to manage resources through game tokens in the pursuit of a goal” (p. 196) with decision-making and goals being of primary importance while other aspects may be relegated to “color” which, while playing a role “has almost nothing to do with the game qua game” (p. 203). Koster (2005) asserts that “games don’t usually have a moral” or “theme” (p. 48), but rather that they “do very well at active verbs” (p. 64). “Since they are about teaching underlying patterns” Koster argues, games “train their players to ignore the fiction that wraps the patterns” (p. 80) and that this “‘dressing’ is largely irrelevant to what the game is about at its core” (p. 84). What these positions have in common is a separation of a game’s representational aspects and the inner life of the player from the essence of the game. Yet the player’s thoughts and experiences (even beyond actions and choices) are crucial to how they play the game, and values are triggered by and/or accrue around a game’s representational aspects.

While by no means the only scholar to take up this emphasis on action, Jesper Juul is the most prominently cited, and perhaps the most nuanced. Nevertheless, as with other scholars, the emphasis on action tends to elide other important aspects of the player’s experience, such as emotional response to the actions and depictions of the game’s world. In his book *Half-Real*, Juul (2005) notes that rules provide a context for actions, a challenge for those actions to overcome, while the fictional world of the game shapes the player’s approach to these rules, to potential actions, and to motivations. However, Juul’s attempt to unify the “real rules” and “fictional worlds” of games places both in the service of action: setting goals for action, possibilities for action, and a context or world to act upon. Despite his early insistence that we

can consider “the game itself or the player of the game” (p. 2), Juul strongly favors the former. The position of the players, the people undertaking the actions, in Juul’s theory is relegated to testing and discovering rules, imagining their way past gaps in the representation of the game world, and concepts such as “attachment,” and “valorization” (p. 40). Juul gives little attention to imagination beyond sometimes being pleasing to the players or useful in overcoming shortcomings in the coherence of the game world, as well as cueing understanding of rules and motivations.

Attachment to outcomes and valorization of outcomes are essential to Juul’s definition of a game, taking their place alongside rules, verifiable and quantifiable outcome, player effort, and negotiable consequences. However both attachment and valorization merely tie in as emotional responses to the challenges and goals involved in winning the game, as set forth by the rules. A player’s attachment to the outcome of the game is given no more complex exploration than being happy upon winning or unhappy upon losing. A player’s valorization of outcome involves ranking outcomes as positive or negative, but this also seems tied to the win states set forth by the rules. This turn in Juul’s work illustrates a problem with many established theories. The problem is not merely the insistence on the importance of action, but rather the focus on a particular type of goal-directed action over other possible experiences of these games.

Something crucial is missing from the established theories described above. I assert that players’ emotional attachment to the outcome of many games (particularly those games which invest in a more coherent fictional world and characters) goes beyond a simplistic happy/unhappy emotional response to winning or losing. There are more complex emotions directed at particularities of the outcome, and the valorization of outcome must involve more than an assessment of game goals and potential outcomes. Furthermore, there may be values not

directly related to outcomes or choices that nevertheless hold great importance to the player's emotional and moral experience. To say otherwise misses a substantial part of what makes a game memorable and appealing, as well as missing the full impact of emotions on how we evaluate our actions.

Martha Nussbaum stands as the most prominent modern theorist arguing for the importance of the emotions to our moral agency. In her earlier work, Nussbaum (2001a) validates emotions as cognitively useful and necessary for ethical decision-making in order to open the way for the experience of ethics via methods other than reasoned discourse. She does so alongside a discussion of agency as both active and passive, structured and dynamic. We may be forced to do wrong, or have wrong done to us, or be put in a situation where we must choose from among competing values of good (p. 5). Yet these outside circumstances do not utterly rob us of our values or our agency. Nor is it ethically wise for one to seek to avoid all such possibilities. Working from Aristotle, Nussbaum says, we must come to terms with values that open us to risk and with a plurality of values that may conflict with each other (xxix). Given this competing field of values, the presentation of ethical situations, especially when we are detached in a manner that distances our self-interest and personal prejudice (such as a play or story), can get to the actual complexity of ethics beyond vague generalities (p. 15). Turning our emotions to the consideration of potential conflicting values in a fictional situation, then, may be crucial in preparing us for the problems of agency in the real world.

The ethical agency in video games, much like the ethical agency Nussbaum discusses, is in some ways active and in the control of the player, but in other ways subject to the external force of the game's design where the player must be subject to these restrictions and/or adapt to the field of conflicting values that such games may set up. Nussbaum thus lays theoretical

groundwork which, when brought to the medium of video games, supports the importance of contradictory and varying valuescapes that I propose. The presence of a field of conflicting values, something we face in our daily lives, calls on a player's moral engagement, marshalling values from outside the game as well as those arising during gameplay. It also, in Nussbaum's estimation, involves a close bond between morality and emotion.

In her later work, Nussbaum (2001b) strengthens her argument for the importance of the emotions in ethics, promoting a view of emotions as cognitive structures in response to our perception of values rather than as irrational reactions. Throughout, Nussbaum asserts that emotions have intentionality, that they involve the "thought of an object combined with thought of the object's salience or importance" (p. 23). Following from the Stoic view of emotions as "value judgements" in developing her "neo-Stoic" theory (p. 4), Nussbaum holds that emotions also involve beliefs about an object in question, further connecting the emotions with ethics (p. 28). Even moreso in this work she upholds artistic texts as important means to explore one's ethics and emotions.

Incorporating Nussbaum's (2001b) view of emotions as value judgments helps make the case for a more nuanced look at a player's valorization of outcomes. To fully understand the player's interaction with a game, we must understand how a player may go about navigating potential outcomes and how the player might feel about them after the fact. In some games, valorization of outcomes may indeed be as simple as winning the game, or reaching a higher score. However, many games involve multiple potential outcomes at the end as well as spread throughout the game. In such games, whether a given outcome is preferred often depends on the disposition of the player. Here, I do not mean "disposition" in the way Juul (2005) uses the term, to describe the players' focus on particular strategies and methods (p. 88-91). I am referring to a

*moral* disposition—a value judgment the player places on the outcomes of a game. It is my argument that a choice between sufficiently complex outcomes, each of which might be sought out by different people, by necessity involves a form of ethical thinking, a state of *moral reflection*.

The state of moral reflection is crucial to understanding a player's approach to many games and to the more complex process towards valorization of outcomes that some games require. While moral reflection impacts the choices a player makes and can often occur at times when the game calls for such choices, I am not referring solely to those moments wherein a player reflects on possible choices of action. Moral reflection involves an awareness of differing and sometimes-contradictory values a person has to consider at a given moment. As such, it also may involve the player questioning her or himself as to why one outcome was valorized over another—what value judgments were accepted or rejected to lead to that point. For the purposes of my project, I am not concerned with what choices a player ultimately makes, or even whether a choice is made, only that a player reflect on the negotiation among differing values, and what aspects of the game prompt that reflection and allow it to resonate with the player.

Regardless of whether the most salient moral reflection occurs in conjunction with choices, before or after such decision points, these points do not occur in isolation. Such points are often the culmination of long periods of play. Through many periods of gameplay, the player may not be facing choices (either the making of or the repercussions of), but emotional value judgments are nevertheless being formed. This emotional evaluation of the game, given weight by Nussbaum's theory, is also crucial to the player's experience.

With his focus on the game's rules Juul (2005) is, of course, hesitant to consider more complex emotions. He argues, "it is *hard* to create a game about emotions because emotions are

hard to implement in rules” (p. 20). Regardless of whether one can create a game about emotions, the prominence of valorization in Juul’s theory suggests that the player **MUST** have emotions about a game. That theorists overlook the more complex varieties of emotions, the ones that necessitate some moral reflection, may be due to the aforementioned focus on the action and outcomes of games.

Moral reflection describes a state, but also a moment (or sequence of moments) that encourages such a state to occur. I will term such an experience in a game where reflection is most likely to occur as a point of reflection, borrowing the language of game level designers use to discuss striking areas of visual interest (points of interest). Just as a point of interest catches the players attention and call them to take a closer look at something they can see on screen, a point of reflection calls on the player to take a closer look at the values the game is evoking at that moment, alongside the valuescapes the player has built up over the course of play thus far. A point of moral reflection, I will argue, is cultivated by certain qualities, techniques, or patterns in a game, but often occurs outside of moments of “meaningful action” as Salen and Zimmerman (2004) conceive it. Such a moment also, by necessity, occurs outside of a “Flow” state as described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and adapted for game studies by a number of scholars, as Flow is a fundamentally non-reflective state. A moment of moral reflection may happen before an outcome is reached, when the player plans for and aims to arrive at a particular outcome, or after the outcome is reached as the player looks back on the particulars of what occurred, or at various diversions along the way. I argue that such a moment is most prone to occur before or after actions, in the moments between actions, in the pauses, in the player’s thoughts about the game while not playing, and in the references that point the player outside the game to aid her or his judgment.

A moment that might encourage moral reflection is, of course, necessary but not sufficient in itself for such reflection to occur. As noted above, moral reflection requires the presence of different values a player might be aware of, either embedded in the game or invited by allusion or reference into the game. To conceptualize this world of values, their origins, and how they interact, I have devised the term *valuescape*. Everything represented in the game world, be it an object, character, beast, or even action, evokes values. These values may be explicitly moral, such as judging a serial killer to be evil, valuing a long-time companion over a stranger, valuing other people above animals, and viewing the act of charitable giving as good. There are also more pragmatic values, associating particular uses with certain objects or actions (e.g. computers, guns, shooting, jumping) while associating other objects or actions as worthless (e.g. a bent can, an empty bottle, running around in circles). These many values, interacting, reinforcing, conflicting, form conceptual background landscapes, valuescapes, the knowledge of which builds in the player's mind over the course of gameplay. To distinguish the origin of these values, much like the differing origins of various landscape features, I classify them in three categories: intra-textual (values established within the game itself, including valuing of particular objects/acts based on rules), inter-textual (values established by reference to other texts), and extra-textual (values established by reference to the real world and/or invited in from the player's life experiences), though the values from different categories may overlap or conflict regarding any particular act or object.

A state of moral reflection may arise when one or more values differ at the moment a break from the flow of meaningful action occurs. Such values do not have to be completely contradictory, but must differ enough to be salient to the player in such moments. Valuescapes are like a set of complex maps (geological, environmental, civic) that when superimposed on

each other reveal interactions. While conflicts do not always have to be between values originating from different valuescapes, states of moral reflection may be more likely to occur at the intersection than within a single valuescape.

I theorize that certain elements within a game prompt the mapping of valuescapes in the player's mind over the course of a game. As most games that evoke moral reflection involve a considerable amount of time playing, analyzing any single moment of moral reflection in isolation would not be fruitful. I must instead look at the pattern of many moments as they develop over the course of the game. The temporal patterning of the player's experience combined with the particular intersections of values and valuescapes would, by necessity, be achieved by different methods in different types of games. A key stage of my project would, then, be to elucidate those different methods.

## **1.2 Existing Work on Ethics and Reflection in Games**

I am not the first scholar to examine video games from an ethical perspective, nor am I the first to consider the potential for reflection in such games. Ian Bogost and Miguel Sicart, in particular, have produced important work in this area. Here, I will briefly discuss their research with an eye toward where my own approach would advance our understanding within the field. In doing so, I will also demonstrate the expanded applicability of my approach to a broader range of games, particularly a number of mainstream games that remain under-researched despite their popularity.

Ian Bogost (2006), in his book *Unit Operations*, gives some credence to reflection and interpretation. In this early work he is focused, however, on the simulation and the rules of the simulation. Player reflection, according to Bogost, ties in with our evaluation of the simulation. Bogost considers reflection in terms of what real world processes of a situation are being



simulated or not simulated. Yet in light of the discussion of values above, this perspective does not account for the depth of the conceptual landscape a player builds within her or his mind. Bogost's concern with simulation grasps only intra-textual and extra-textual values, values divined from interacting with the text and values brought to bear from the real world. It also provides a limited view on even these values, reducing them to knowledge about the processing of situations and objects. The perspective fails to grasp allusions and understandings brought in from other texts, that is, the inter-textual values. It also fails to grasp values of any emotional or moral weight.

Miguel Sicart (2009), however, does consider moral reflection in the pauses between actions. Indeed, one such scenario serves as the introduction to his book *The Ethics of Computer Games* (2009)—the depletion of ammo in a game opening up a pause wherein he could overhear the conversations of enemies and reflect on the larger picture. Sicart (2013) gives a more thorough account of this aspect of game ethics in relation to the “slow technology” movement of human-computer interaction (p.72). He puts forth the idea that a move away from efficient action—the implementation of pauses, tedium, and ambiguity—opens up a space for players to reflect, interpret, and insert their own values into the game world. Though he notes this design element is not for all games, Sicart (2013) asserts that, “for ethical gameplay to take place in a meaningful way, game design should be inspired by the idea of slow technologies” (p.75). In Sicart's prescriptive approach to ethical game design, this is a necessary tool.

Sicart does important work in breaking from the tradition of meaningful action as the key to video game theories, and he rightly sees an obstruction of this action as opening space for reflection. However, Sicart's discussion centers on particular types of games that display a conscious disruption of action and an emphasis on inefficiency. My approach to moments of

moral reflection holds that they do not require such special circumstances to function. While it is true that purposeful inefficiencies and disruptions may prove powerful methods to open moments of moral reflection, such techniques are but one tool for doing so. All games to some extent operate on the tension of movement and rest. All games offer breaks, pauses, or diversions from the progression of meaningful actions, any of which might offer up potential moments of moral reflection. Many games effectively mold the temporality of play towards ethical ends without sacrificing the efficiency of play. Other games may even allow for such moments unintentionally. While Sicart's discussion of such slow technology techniques in relation to games is a crucial step in the research, I argue such techniques are neither necessary nor in themselves sufficient (out of context) to open game spaces to moral reflection.

Sicart (2013) posits “*ethical gameplay* as the ludic experience in which regulation, mediation, or goals require from the player moral reflection beyond the calculation of statistics and possibilities” (p. 24). Sicart's focus in the design of ethical gameplay lies in the relations between the “procedural” or system/rules of the game and the “semiotic” or representational aspects, particularly in the creation of “conceptual tension” or “cognitive friction” between these two (p. 91, 95). Unlike many games that seek harmony and clarity between the semiotic and the procedural so that players can easily plan and understand the results of potential actions, Sicart argues that for an ethical game the relations should be hampered or obscured to break from conventional expectations (p. 95). This focus follows from the slow technology discussion above, and culminates in a discussion of “Wicked Problems,” moral dilemmas whose setup and potential outcomes are imperfectly understood by the player, whose “solutions” are not right or wrong but left to the player's own moral evaluation (p. 105-106). “No More Safety,” Sicart

decrees (p. 102). Indeed, his examples focus on scenarios that complicate and hinder the players in their progression.

The procedural aspects Sicart refers to ultimately address a very particular set of what my approach would term intra-textual values (those relating to the possibilities and consequences of actions), while the semiotic aspects he refers to may be a combination of other values. Such a tension may indeed be very powerful in forming a state of moral reflection, but there are other tensions that do so as well. Sicart identifies a very specific (and admittedly especially powerful) interaction as key to ethical game design when there are many other interactions that lead to moral reflection.

Bogost (2011) holds a position similar to Sicart's regarding the ethical implications of playing weak and/or hindered avatars. His chapter on empathy focuses on the games *Darfur is Dying* and *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, proposing that games evoke empathy through having players inhabit characters of limited ability (p. 22). Bogost argues that, "it is the vulnerable... who deserve our empathy" and suggests that most mainstream games with their "roles of power" are unable to evoke such empathy. Games indeed have the power to put players in a role different from their own, and being in "someone else's shoes" (p. 18) is a common way of thinking about empathy. That does not mean, however, that this is the only method through which games evoke empathy.

The problem with Bogost's account is that it implies another assumption—that one must be in a position of powerlessness in order to have a moral or ethical relation to the powerless. Holding such an assumption would seem to invalidate the ethical potential of art from painting to literature to film and beyond. In the case that perhaps he intended this line of thought to apply to games alone, Bogost still does little to prove such empathy cannot be evoked from a position of

power. I propose that to become aware of one's own treatment of vulnerable characters can be a striking moment, even if approaching the game world as an empowered player/character. The project I put forth would allow for such potentials, and offer other ways to understand how they might work.

My approach adds to that of Bogost's and Sicart's approaches in two significant ways beyond the nuances noted above. First, my approach explicitly relies on an account of the development of patterns over time in the player's experience of a game. As most games are long-form, multi-hour experiences, such an account seems crucial. Failure to consider the ongoing negotiation of competing values, and the patterning of moments that call for such negotiations, may lead to a focus only on the most extreme moments and techniques to the detriment of the broader range of possibilities. Such an issue accounts for the problems described above.

Perhaps more importantly, my approach facilitates a discussion of ethics within a far greater number of games—games played by a far greater number of people. Bogost and Sicart both focus their analyses on smaller independent games, with the occasional nod only to those mainstream games in instances where such games use techniques similar to independent games. While their respective works, Bogost and Sicart have made invaluable contributions to the field by exploring how such games function and what techniques may be learned from them. However, their intention is prescriptive—an argument about what games *should be* from a certain perspective—and as such fails to be adequately *descriptive*, to account for the ethical possibilities that *are already* occurring in many mainstream games.

In terms of ethics, the focus on independent games and the challenge to the capacity of mainstream games extends even in popular games criticism outside of academia, so my work could also speak to that line of critique. Eron Rauch (2014) compares indie games to the

impressionist art movement as the site of radical statements on power relations while holding mainstream games analogous to traditional realism offering little to actual engage the modern condition. Lana Polansky (2017) argues that the games industry, having “matured entirely within the context of late capitalism and neoliberalism” echoes those ideologies and suggests that the only alternative interest she finds lies in independent games, “its creative fringe, where artists are finding ways to use the medium to capture as well as suggest alternatives to our current predicament” (Class Politics of Digital Media section). Some go beyond doubting mainstream games’ capacity for ethics to actively attacking their existence. Game designer Porpentine, in an interview with *The New Inquiry* (2013), asserts that she wants to destroy “all games culture,” arguing, “it’s completely unredeemable... Games journalism is toxic, games writing is toxic, game design—the most popular, the mainstream of it is just sick” (para. 7). Even famed game designer Warren Spector critiques mainstream games in an interview with Alex Wawro of *Gamasutra* (2016), with such statements as, “in the mainstream space I really haven’t seen a whole lot of progress... Thank god for the indie space, there are people trying interesting things there,” as he bemoans that “we haven’t done a lot with conversation, and establishing emotional relationships with characters in games” (para. 14-15). Independent games are certainly a radical alternative site of ethical and emotional expression, but my research suggests that mainstream games can also engage similar ethical considerations and, perhaps more importantly, get players to reflect upon their own values.

### **1.3 Plan of Study**

The goal of my project is to study moral reflection, the patterns and techniques most likely bring it about, and the values and context that make particular moments of moral reflection so poignant. I make no judgment regarding all the particular outcomes of such reflections or the

probabilities of player's altering their personal values on the basis of such a state. I will leave that debate to other scholars. Nor do I propose to offer a full analysis of the overarching ideology of any particular game. My purpose is not to argue a game's ideology, but to reveal when and how players are called to reflect on any values present within a game—I am more concerned *that* players reflect, and about *how* they are prompted to reflect than about the precise ideological content or intention. I will limit my analysis to the state of moral reflection as it occurs in mainstream games, those played by the majority of players.

In selecting my objects of study, I consider a number of factors. First, I will focus only on single-player games. While I believe moral reflection occurs in multiplayer games, limiting my analysis to single-player games make it easier to discuss factors of a game's design that may influence a player's experience and isolate those techniques and patterns from the broad variety of experiences other players might contribute. Within the range of games that focus primarily on single-player experiences, games of the role-playing genre (RPGs) are among the most popular. These games tend to share many design techniques with other single-player genres such as action/shooters, yet with the addition of a much broader variety of other techniques. Therefore, in order to give the dissertation a focus, yet also have some potential applicability to other genres, my objects of study will be drawn from among the most popular single-player RPGs of their years.

Despite my focus on a particular genre of mainstream games, my selection will still encapsulate the full range of gameplay common to all mainstream single-player games. Of the games I will analyze, *Fallout 4* and *Skyrim* utilize many of the techniques common to first-person action shooters, while set in an open world layout. *The Witcher* and *Dragon Age* series of games both share many characteristics with third-person adventure games, another popular

genre. Because the games utilize so many of the same techniques, my analysis of moral reflection in single-player RPGs may suggest places to look for it in these other genres as well.

My primary mode of analysis is textual analysis—examining features and potentialities built into these games, including any official patch or downloadable content that was released.

Where possible, I have attempted to take into account some possible variations of the game in my analysis. However, some of these games have enough variation it would not be feasible for this project to explore every variation over the course of the entire game in full detail.

Regardless, the primary arguments I put forth should continue to apply to the game no matter the particular ordering each player experiences.

As my theoretical grounding privileges emotions and moral judgements, my analysis and data gathering also necessitate considering my own moral and emotional responses to the games in question. While examining the responses of numerous other players to these games might be ideal, my focus on accounting for such lengthy amounts of gameplay precludes that possibility. I could not ask another individual, let alone multiple subjects, to play the hundred or more hours it would take to work through an entire game while taking detailed notes along the way for the purposes of this study.

While by necessity the only player's thoughts and feelings I have access to in this endeavor are my own, my analysis does not rely purely on my own subjectivity. We can in some ways predict player reactions, and certainly a range of possible actions and interpretations from analyzing the text itself. Furthermore, while I do not have access to other minds playing these particular games, I can infer based on other theories and research in cognitive psychology what the impact of various techniques within the text might be. If my personal experience and the structure of the text itself also bear this research out, then a credible argument can be made.

In order to account for the full scope of gameplay, I played the entirety of *The Witcher* series of games, the *Dragon Age* series, and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, as well as a significant portion of *Fallout 4*. Along the way I took meticulous notes of my experience of time as well as any values evoked and any key gameplay or narrative occurrences encountered. I then read this data against the theory derived from my research to select key portions of gameplay for analysis, taking care to include any relevant context or consequences across the broader scope of the game. For my more detailed analysis, I found ways to replay particular segments, as well as research potential alternative outcomes of the segments.

#### **1.4 Chapter Outline**

The first step towards making an argument about the state of moral reflection in games must involve distinguishing reflection as a state from other prominent states discussed in game studies, generally action-oriented states. Interrogating the theory surrounding these states, particularly the state of flow that is especially privileged by many game scholars, reveals that they do not overlap with reflection. However, we can consider that such states and the state of reflection might have beneficial relationships with each other, and a deeper analysis of flow theory bears this out. I utilize flow research alongside a neo-Piagetian reading of cognition and knowledge development to argue that the alternation of states of action and reflection is key to understanding ethical engagement.

My second chapter turns in more detail to understanding how games may manipulate this patterning of time towards ethical engagement. I begin from a theory, supported by Nussbaum, on the role time and memory plays in ethics. I work with cognitive memory research to advance my theory on the spacing of moments of reflection to prompt players to construct and reflect upon valuescapes. Through a case study of *The Witcher 2*, I demonstrate that the precise



arrangement and pacing of events in the form of action sequences and points of reflection determines how we construct our valuescapes and which value conflicts we are most likely to reflect upon. Moral reflection not only requires that action and reflection work together, but also that action sequences and points of reflection be arranged in particular ways.

We can see the importance of how points of reflection are spaced throughout a game, but these points of reflection are nothing without valuescapes to reflect upon. While my second chapter reveals how values are evoked in smaller segments of gameplay, over the course of a lengthy game there must also be some salient memory trigger for valuescapes to form around and for the player to repeatedly engage these valuescapes through. My third chapter focuses on non-player characters (NPCs), which serve as the most prominent examples of such triggers in RPGs. To analyze the role such NPCs play in our engagement with valuescapes, I look at the entire game arc of the character Iron Bull in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* in relation to the key value conflicts surrounding him. Through interactions over the course of the game (which in a lengthy RPG are also spaced throughout days, weeks, or months of the player's lived everyday life outside the game), a valuescape develops gradually in association with any major character. Through repeated interactions with such characters the game often prompts the player to engage and reflect upon key value conflicts.

The virtual spaces or environments of a game, and the various objects in those spaces, serve as another key trigger for valuescapes to form around, and through which the player may engage with key value conflicts. Such spaces, whether they be game hubs or striking points of interest in the game's wilderness environments, can evoke and serve as a focal points for values and can themselves contribute to the player's temporal experience of action sequences and points of reflection. Given my reliance on cutscenes and quest narratives in previous chapters, this final

chapter is also necessary to unveil how my argument functions even outside of those narrative or quest systems. My analysis of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* in this chapter, along with my counter-example of *Fallout 4*, proves that even among mainstream RPGs a game need not rely on one method to evoke values and prompt moral reflection.

Altogether, the argument I put forth demonstrates how points of reflection spread throughout these games prompt the player to reflect upon valuescapes, as well as what elements of the games evoke values and act as an anchor for these valuescapes. I accomplish this through an analysis of mainstream RPGs—the very kinds of games most theorists shy away from or outright decry when discussing ethics in games. Along the way I decenter action from its privileged position and put forth a new proposition of reflection and action working together to engage players, each having a positive effect on the other rather than one being solely responsible for player enjoyment. Finally, I establish the value of game scholarship considering the entire scope of a lengthy game. Certainly, many arguments may not require such time-consuming analysis, but my work demonstrates what might be missed if we fail to consider how players might encounter a game in increments of time spaced out over a lengthy period of their daily lives. When it comes to ethical engagement with video games, we must absolutely consider time, memory, emotion, and values or we will be left praising the same types of independent games for the same types of techniques over and over, while dismissing major titles as frivolous or only fit to be read in their oddities or failures, never their regularly employed techniques.

## 2 CHAPTER ONE: STATES OF ACTION AND REFLECTION

Before I make a case for the workings of moral reflection in video games, I must first distinguish reflection as a state from the other, action-focused states commonly discussed in

game studies. In particular, I must address what many game scholars uphold as the most pure, ideal action state in games—flow. In the context of ethics I have laid out, challenging the privileged status of flow in game studies is an essential first step. In this chapter, I will argue flow’s status as a non-reflective state, and I will, in part, use Csikszentmihalyi’s original flow theories to do so. Interrogating the relationship between flow and reflection will pave the way to understanding the interactions between reflection and other prominent action states. However, I do not wish to completely unseat flow and action. Rather, I wish to make room for something alongside—reflection—and to demonstrate that, rather than opposing or unrelated concepts, looking at the back and forth between these states is especially fruitful for game studies. I will utilize the work of Csikszentmihalyi and other flow scholars to argue reflection’s contribution to the flow state, and then use neo-Piagetian readings of some of Piaget’s concepts to argue flow-like states have a useful impact on the process of reflection. This chapter provides a theoretical argument for reflection and its interaction with other experiential states that will be given more concrete analysis in later chapters as it manifests in single-player RPGs.

## 2.1 Flow

Unseating flow’s prominence is a challenge to the number of game studies scholars who uphold it as not only important, but rather the primary pursuit of game design. Hiwiler (2016) labels flow “the *fundamental game design directive*,” stating that “games that do not have an ulterior motive for players besides player satisfaction... should be primarily driven in all decisions toward providing players flow” (p. 91).<sup>1</sup> In essence, for Hiwiler all gaming satisfaction involves flow. Isbister (2016) notes that “increasingly, game designers aim to offer players

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<sup>1</sup> One might argue that consideration of moral issues represents an “ulterior motive” for the purposes of Hiwiler’s argument, but that would assume engaging with complex ethical and emotional situations cannot be part of player satisfaction.

interesting choices that fall within that sweet spot, generating flow,” going on to argue that the “theory has been a boon to the game design and research communities” for its usefulness in moving away from simple “fun” to “more nuanced emotional territory” (p. 5). In Isbister’s estimation, players’ discussions of emotions mostly relate to flow, or to the emotions Csikszentmihalyi sets against flow, “frustration, confusion, discouragement” (p. 5). Csikszentmihalyi’s “optimal experience,” so conveniently aligned in its descriptions with many testimonies of gameplay at its most exhilarating and addicting, achieves an exalted status in game studies—though at the expense of overlooking many other experiential states a player might encounter in a game.

Flow, for many designers and theorists, is considered the primary state of importance to design goals. Hiwiler acknowledges that games are not all flow, but he makes clear his position that to leave flow is detrimental. Focused on Csikszentmihalyi’s chart of flow as the perfect amount of challenge, Hiwiler describes experience outside the state of flow as either “frustrating” or “painfully dull” (p. 88). Jenova Chen’s game *flow* (2006) shares a similar obsession—attempting to always keep the player in a flow state. While offering a more nuanced view that includes states outside of flow, Clark (Anthony & Clark, 2014) gives a good summary of designer focus on navigating this channel between boredom and anxiety. She discusses various models of reaching the flow state beyond the “perfect model” of always keeping skills and challenges balanced (anywhere from high frustration games that force the player to struggle towards flow, to a zig-zag pattern, to dynamic difficulty adjustment) but the focus in these design models remains on flow itself (p. 121-129). Even some theorists who do not mention flow by name privilege ideas that are quite similar, if not identical. Nørgård discusses two affective states involved in gameplay:

One affective relation leads the player into rapture—an affective state of being engulfed and becoming one with the rhythm of gameplay—while the other affective relation leads the player into rupture—an affective state of being an outcast and being exposed by the interaction demands of gameplay (Nørgård 2016, p. 94).

Nørgård’s definitions of rapture and rupture here, and the descriptions of experiences that follow them, are almost precisely aligned with Csikszentmihalyi’s descriptions of flow, where skills are perfectly in tune with the challenges faced, and anxiety, where challenges exceed a person’s skills. The “elegant design” espoused by Anna Anthropy (Anthropy & Clark, 2014),<sup>2</sup> while not entirely identical to flow, has similar aims in terms of avoiding psychic disorder (p. 32-33). All these theorists and designers uphold the ideal of a flow state as the primary state they should care about, and as a state that can and should theoretically be reached and maintained reliably through proper design.

For all the emphasis on flow in game studies, theorists rarely delve further into Csikszentmihalyi’s work than conceiving flow as an optimal experience in the sweet spot between boredom and anxiety. Flow, however, was not theorized as simply a tool for continual captivation, the way many designers see it. The various methods Clark (Anthropy & Clark, 2014) describes of designers seeking to build and maintain flow longitudinally across gameplay, rather than in particular moments of the experience, are not coming from a complete understanding of flow (p. 120-125). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) did not conceive of flow as something that could be constantly maintained in any particular activity, nor necessarily as something that should. An important part of flow, as he saw it, was the more complex and enriched self that would “emerge stronger afterward” (p. 65-66). Flow was conceived as a state

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<sup>2</sup> Anthropy and Clark list the book as co-written, however they each wrote a separate section. While their arguments are mostly aligned, they happen to differ on the very subject matter I am most interested. Thus I will be discussing their ideas separately in the main text.

that people can and do put a lot of energy and thought into reaching, but not one where a person can live, even for every moment of a particular activity. As Csikszentmihalyi (1975) notes, anxiety and boredom in the flow chart describe a range of states outside the more narrow flow channel where a person faces high challenges relative to skills or low challenges relative to skills, respectively, and we can expect in normal circumstances to move among these states sometimes within the same activity (p. 52-53). Whether ideal or not, the range of anxiety and boredom outside the narrow flow channel should not be thought of as states that are avoidable. We should thus consider what functions the states outside of flow might serve in the overall experience of a game.

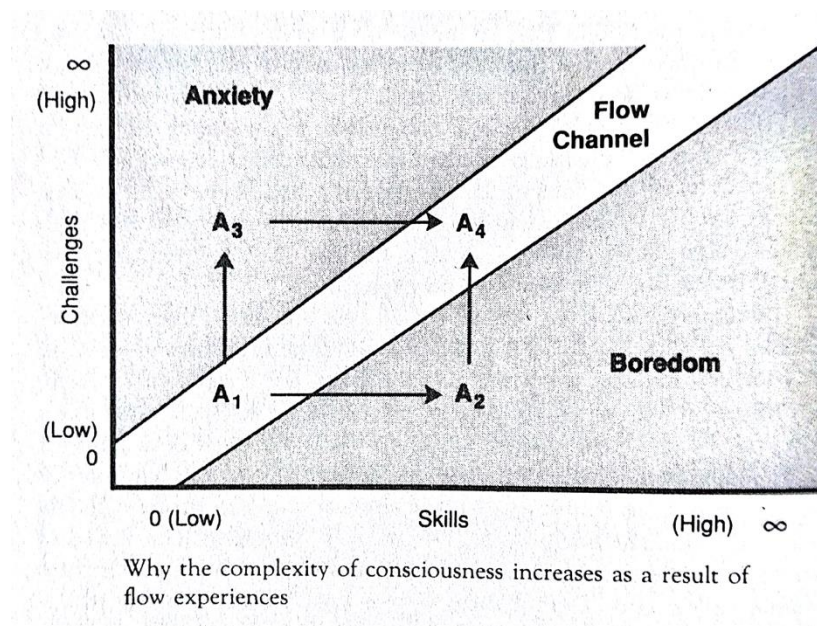


Figure 1 The flow channel showing movement between states (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 74)

Part of the fetishizing of flow in games research involves taking other aspects considered enjoyable in games and subsuming them under this ideal experience. Isbister (2016) goes so far as to argue that maintaining constant flow sets the stage, somehow, for emotional responses, parasocial interactions, and connecting our emotional experiences in the moment with past

experiences, stating that, “when designers offer interesting choices and keep players in flow, they’re able to also start evoking another class of feelings in their players—the rich social emotions we experience in relationship with others” (p. 6-7). While Csikszentmihalyi did not say flow required solitary activities (even though most of the reports are from such activities), the reflective, social, complex range of emotional experiences referenced by Isbister do not match the descriptions of the flow state itself. Csikszentmihalyi certainly would not claim constant maintenance of flow as a prerequisite for such experiences.

Challenging flow’s prominence in game studies, then, will require a more thorough examination of the concept as originally theorized. First, to distinguish flow from my research focus, and to combat the tendency to colonize all that is good or important in games under the umbrella of flow, I must clarify that flow is a nonreflective state. Mitchell (1988), theorizing about Csikszentmihalyi’s early flow research, puts forth the argument that rationalization is antithetical to flow and one of the primary inhibitors of flow in the social conditions of daily life (p. 50). While not addressing rationalization in quite the way that Mitchell does, Csikszentmihalyi’s later summation of his theory supports this. A key feature of flow as Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes it is a “merging of action and awareness,” such that, “there is no excess psychic energy left over to process any information but what the activity offers” (p. 53). He calls this “one of the most universal and distinctive features,” that “people become so involved in what they are doing that the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; they stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing” (p. 53). While this lines up neatly with Nørgård’s “rapture” described above, it sits quite at odds with any notion of conscious reflection. Reflection requires, at the very least, an awareness of one’s past

self outside of the current activity. Csikszentmihalyi is quite explicit about the disconnect between flow and reflection:

In normal life, we keep interrupting what we do with doubts and questions... Repeatedly we question the necessity of our actions, and evaluate critically the reasons for carrying them out. But in flow there is no need to reflect, because the action carries us forward as if by magic (p. 54).

My project requires that people reflect upon their actions to consider what they are doing and why they are doing it. That reflection does not always need to be deep or lengthy for the ethical work I have been discussing to take place, but it needs to be present, and in the midst of flow such thoughts are pushed aside.

The deepest roots of this opposition lie in what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) theorized as one of the most beneficial aspects of flow—that of correcting psychic disorder or psychic entropy. Such “information that conflicts with existing intentions, or distracts us from carrying them out,” could over time “weaken the self to the point that it is no longer able to invest attention and pursue its goals” (p. 36-37). Csikszentmihalyi sees in flow a psychological state crucial to combating this entropy, but its usefulness in avoiding and recuperating from unpleasantness and conflicting information also means that we cannot engage with Nussbaum’s conflicting goods—we cannot engage the plurality of values so important to moral engagement, at least not during the flow state. Csikszentmihalyi’s (1988) theory here is rooted in a kind of economy of “attention” and “awareness,” the energy we spend interacting with the world and the cognitive processes in response to new information so gained (p. 19). Csikszentmihalyi (1988) sees the self as a “hierarchy of goals,” and to that end states:

Whenever a new experience enters consciousness it is evaluated in terms of the goals that reflect the self, and it is dealt with accordingly. A bit of information that fits these goals strengthens the structure of the self, whereas one that conflicts with them creates disorder in consciousness and threatens the integrity of the self (p. 22).



That Csikszentmihalyi sees such conflicts as detrimental to the self, while Nussbaum sees them as of key importance to the self, is an issue we may also interrogate, but the key point to consider here is the incompatibility of these states. Flow, as Csikszentmihalyi put it, is a state where “all the contents of consciousness are in harmony with each other, and with the goals that define the person’s self,” and “because the tendency of the self is to reproduce itself... experiencing flow becomes one of the central goals of the self” (p. 24). Moral reflection as I have conceived it, however, is a state heavy with potential disruption. It is a memorable state, to be sure, but it is not necessarily a pleasant one—nor, if we are to borrow Csikszentmihalyi’s economy of attention and awareness, is it one that we can pursue *ad infinitum*.

## 2.2 Other Game States

Flow as a state, then, cannot overlap with reflection. However, there are other action states discussed in game studies that might demand examination along this front. To understand how these states prove unlikely to overlap with reflection, we can still make use of Csikszentmihalyi’s flow research, particularly his focus on how challenging an activity is compared to an individual’s confidence and skills. One key reason flow is non-reflective, as discussed above, has much to do with these challenges. As Csikszentmihalyi (1975) notes: following the “demands for action” that these activities entail, “the person is too involved with the experience to reflect on it” (p. 46-47). Of course, in the case of flow the person also has the skills and confidence to match such challenges and thus the action is rewarding and flows onward free from the disruption of failure. Yet, considering a state of anxiety where the challenges faced are beyond what a person is prepared to meet, opportunities for reflection seem unlikely to present themselves in the moment. States of low challenge, on the other hand, would not have this problem. The *opportunity* for reflection would be there, but we must interrogate

such states in more detail to discern whether they would contain anything to reflect upon. Moral reflection, as I conceive it, must involve both the opportunity for reflection (the point of reflection) and the presence of value cues to reflect upon.

Many games, sometimes accidentally but sometimes through purposeful design, engender the state that Csikszentmihalyi terms “anxiety.” As discussed above, anxiety is unlikely to provide players the opportunity for moral reflection, yet considering this state in more detail we can theorize what its relationship to reflection might be. Clark (Anthony & Clark, 2014) describes some games that aim for such a state for their entirety, setting extreme challenge from the beginning, rather than the perfectly matched challenges and skills described as conducive for a flow state (p. 129-130). These games would be very frustrating at first and the player would have to raise their skills to the challenge through repeated trial and error in order to achieve a flow state, rather than the game being designed to lead the player into that state from the beginning. Clark describes the indie game *Three Body Problem* (2012) by Robin Burkinshaw, but this intentional crafting of extreme challenge can also be found to some extent in more mainstream games such as *Dark Souls*. Of course, anxiety can be found in almost all games to some extent, perhaps unintentionally from poor playtesting, or perhaps when the player attempts to jump ahead toward content they are not yet prepared for. Regardless, the player in a state of anxiety is likely to be focused first and foremost on how they will overcome the challenges and continue on to the next set of challenges, rather than take the time to consider a plurality of other values not directly related to the gameplay goal at hand—the higher the challenge, the higher the anxiety and the less opportunity for reflection.

The states of anxiety and reflection, then, could not overlap, yet we might still consider how they interact. In a broader sense, reflection can include reflecting on how the player’s

manipulations of game controls and resources matched up to the challenge, revising the player's actions before the next attempt, though such reflection is unlikely to have moral content.

However, in exasperated moments between attempts, a player's mind might drift and it is possible moral reflection might take place—reflection, for example on one's own obsession with beating one's head against the same challenge repeatedly, or reflection on the cruelty involved in some action represented in this way. In such cases, reflection remains a separate state, but through the probable ending of extreme anxiety (the pause in action that follows failure) one might transition into a state of reflection. Heightened anxiety could thus be a technique of prompting the pause, or opportunity, for a point of reflection in certain instances, even if reflection could not occur within anxiety-inducing gameplay.

For low-challenge states, we must consider not only level of challenge, but also the types of activities involved and how likely they are to contain value cues. One such state well known in game studies would be grinding—perhaps the closest mainstream game design choice to an intentionally crafted experience of what Csikszentmihalyi would label boredom. This state involves boredom endured for the sake of long-term gain, however, and as such has become a staple of many game genres such as the JRPG and many MMORPGs. As Clark (Anthony & Clark, 2014) describes it, grinding is a “kind of repeated rote activity... performing the same actions again and again for the sake of reward... not because the player herself is understanding the system more deeply... but simply because the numbers of resources are climbing” (p. 145). Clark further notes that “grinding takes time, not skill or understanding” (p. 145). This state would clearly fall below the channel of flow into the “boredom” category of Csikszentmihalyi's graph of skills and challenges—involving much lower amounts of challenge compared to the player's skill level. Grinding has, however, also been described as almost trance-like, as

Madigan's (2016) interviews reveal (p. 88). The trance-like quality of grinding would not be due to intense concentration like the flow state, but rather due to the low challenge level allowing the mind to wander. The distinction would be, from Csikszentmihalyi's assertions, that there should be no sense of accomplishment stemming from the state of grinding itself, even if one ultimately feels accomplished by what one eventually gains out of the process. Because grinding offers no challenge and requires little focus, we must admit that it offers the opportunity for reflection. However, opportunity alone does not suffice if one is unlikely to encounter many value cues to reflect upon in the midst of such rote drudgery, aside from perhaps a meta-reflection on why one is engaged in that activity.<sup>3</sup> Other low-challenge activities similar to grinding, such as searching the area after a fight, or traversing long distances in the game world in pursuit of goals marked on the map, might be more likely to offer both opportunity and material for reflection, especially if they draw the player's attention to value cues embedded in the game world (as I will discuss in later chapters). Such cases fall at the minimal range of activity, however, and are often situated such that relative to the more flow-like intense action surrounding them, they function as a sort of pause in the action of gameplay.

Compulsion loops found in heavily loot-focused games mark a state somewhat similar to grinding, but perhaps even more problematic for reflection. Madigan (2016) comes at this in relation to B. F. Skinner and Skinner boxes, or conditioning through rewards. "The dungeons of the *Diablo* games," Madigan asserts, "act as Skinner boxes. You go into them, and then you figure out what to click on to get the best rewards. It's just something you do automatically in the

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<sup>3</sup> The player might conceivably find herself thinking back to various value conflicts experienced in other portions of the game while in this state, but in such cases the value cues are likely too removed from the current experience of the game to label this a true point of reflection. In these instances, such reflection relies entirely on the player's own memories rather than being triggered by cues within the game.

game when you see a chest or an elite monster” (p. 107). Madigan calls this a “compulsion loop... you see a trigger (the treasure chest), you perform an action (you click on it), and you get a reward (loot)” (p. 107). Like grinding, this state usually lacks the fulfilling perfect match of skills to challenges that Csikszentmihalyi discusses, and would not support Csikszentmihalyi’s assertions of underlying personal growth once one emerges on the other end. Compulsion is certainly an apt description of this state of play. It is the state of the gambler—it may take upon itself some end goals, but ultimately it anticipates the potential pleasure of the next moment rather than those end goals. As Madigan notes, “the power of loot-based games relies on what’s known as a ‘variable schedule’: sometimes you open the chest or kill the monster and you get nothing, or at most nothing good. Other times, though, you get a fist full of awesome” (p. 109). Madigan traces these surprising, unpredictable rewards to dopamine release, which means “across a variety of animals, situations, and outcomes, random rewards outperform any other kind of reward schedule in terms of getting the person (or animal) to do what you want... because it turns out it’s not the loot itself that’s so exciting... it is the loot *drop*... to get really specific about it, it’s the *anticipation* of the loot drop” (p. 110). Such a state, drawing the player into a gambler’s cycle of dopamine chasing, leaves little opportunity for reflection even though it does not necessarily involve a high degree of challenge. Unlike grinding, being within a Skinner Box is less boredom and more continuous pursuit of temporary pleasures. The player’s mind does not wander, as it might during a state of grinding, but rather remains focused on reward objects that are highly unlikely to provide any conflicting values to reflect on.

Of course, elements of the Skinner box are active in almost every RPG. However, some games emphasize these compulsion loops more than other games. Peppered throughout, these variable rewards are still a powerful psychological reward to keep the player moving through the

game. Yet, games are capable of bringing players into and out of a compulsion loop. For games such as the *Diablo* and *Borderlands* series, the designers want you in this state for most of the time, constantly seeking the next reward. Such games merge this compulsion loop drive into and out of the action of flow states, which would be even less conducive to reflection. Other RPGs stretch out the time between such rewards, and may purposefully draw the player's attention away from this reward system to engage the game in other ways. These games are more likely to offer points of reflection interspersed between compulsion or flow states. Even when they interact in this way, compulsion and reflection states will not overlap.

### **2.3 Reflection and Action Working Together**

While I seek to distinguish reflection from these other states and unseat flow and action from their place of prominence, I do not wish to promote a kind of Cartesian dualism with respect to our moral and emotional experiences of game play. On the contrary, I will argue that how points of reflection are encountered in relation to more action-oriented states (especially flow) proves crucial to their impact. Some game scholars acknowledge the importance of an oscillation between flow states and other emotions. In her analysis of the game *Train*, where players are making trains run efficiently in what ultimately is revealed to be a holocaust scenario, Isbister (2016) notes that the designer “creates tension by juxtaposing the satisfying, flow-style emotions the player feels while mastering the system and rules of the game with the negative emotions that arise from the social context of these actions” (p. 10). In this case, establishing flow before interrupting it with unpleasant reflection on the consequences of our actions is key to the full impact of the latter—one cannot just pull someone aside and ask them to imagine mastering some activity only to find out it was being used to commit atrocities and expect the

same result. While *Train* is an indie board game, this same potential, and more, lies within mainstream video games with interspersed points of reflection.

One might also view breaks in the action of gameplay as a sort of cognitive necessity for the player to recover before being thrown back into heavy action, though such a theory would be an oversimplification that nevertheless privileges action. Hiwiler (2016), in his analysis of the long periods of unchallenging travel in between the boss battles of *Shadow of the Colossus*, argues such moments still fall under the purview of flow:

The goal is to get the player to bounce off the edges of her flow channel. After she experiences something difficult, the player needs time to breathe and readjust. Thus, she gets a period of easy play that brings her back down toward the boredom side of the flow channel. Before she gets there, though, the developers reintroduce the challenge again, even harder than before, to deal with the player's increased mastery. It's all flow (p. 90).

A prime example of the fetishization of flow in game design, Hiwiler's argument here is also a fundamental misunderstanding of flow. Despite how it has been reconceived in game design charts such as those in Hiwiler's book, Csikszentmihalyi conceived of flow as a narrow channel of *optimal* experience, not an ever-widening cone that one could get to encapsulate the entirety of any particular experience. Any state where the challenges do not perfectly match the skills of the person would not, strictly speaking, be a flow state. While lower challenge would lead to boredom and higher challenge to anxiety, we should not make the mistake, like Hiwiler, of conceiving of this with the colloquial interpretation of boredom or anxiety. If I'm not bored, as we typically think of it, but I'm not anxious, that does not necessarily mean I am in flow.

Hiwiler here attempts to avoid acknowledging or engaging with the differences and interactions between flow and other states by colonizing all parts of a well-designed game as merely different parts of a flow experience. This is not to say that such periods cannot serve the function of recovery in between action and/or flow states, but that is not necessarily the entirety of the

player's experience with them. Game scholars such as Hiwiler (2016) and Isbister (2016) broaden the concept of flow far past the more narrow usage of its original conception, and in doing so they obscure the importance of shifting between states in a game.

Although she does not explore the question more deeply, Clark (Anthropy & Clark, 2014) has another theory on the lengthy journeys in *Shadow of the Colossus*—that they might be a place for reflection on the game's meaning beyond execution of effective gameplay in the face of challenges:

Why does *Shadow of the Colossus* require these lengthy travel times, long enough that some players... think the ride could even become boring? The contrast between battle and travel feels deliberate: riding across the plains is a relaxation in the resistance of the system... For some players, this absence of resistance might even offer a chance to pause and reflect, much as transit times often do in the real world, and perhaps to consider the larger questions of the game, like why you are hunting these gigantic, solitary, often peaceful-seeming creatures. When the player is done with her moment of pause, the goals of the game are right there waiting to be picked up again (p. 134).

The contrast between Hiwiler's and Clark's analyses of the game is striking. While Hiwiler attempts to subsume all moments of play as only meaningful to flow, indifferent to any other distinct experience to be encountered there, Clark addresses these moments on their own terms. While the crux of Clark's argument in this chapter is the importance of the player's encounter with resistance of various types in the game, she is open to acknowledging the possible uses and importance of experiences without resistance. A sudden slack in the resistance of the game can constitute a pause where moral reflection may take place.

Flow research outside of games studies has, at many points, been more supportive of an integrated flow perspective, which is open to shifts between states, than a narrow flow-centered approach. The distinction Csikszentmihalyi makes between flow and other pleasurable states serves as one notable instance. Pleasure, for Csikszentmihalyi, (1990) is not happiness or fulfillment, but rather it is found in "experiences that return consciousness to order after the



needs of the body intrude and cause psychic entropy to occur... they do not produce psychological growth” (p. 46). Here, Csikszentmihalyi pushes past simply recovering from psychic entropy and argues that flow does more. He notes that, “when people ponder further about what makes their lives rewarding, they tend to move beyond pleasant memories and begin to remember other events, other experiences,” which he terms “enjoyment... characterized by this forward movement: by a sense of novelty, of accomplishment (p. 46). Thus, flow is not just any pleasurable state where one is not bored or anxious. Flow is a special state that accomplishes some form of self-growth, and this self-growth may be the start to theorizing a beneficial interaction between flow and reflection. Bringing in this version of flow, already conceived in relation to other states and to self-growth beyond the pursuit of pleasure, offers far more potential than flow’s typical usage in game studies.

In his discussion of self-growth and “losing the sense of self” during the flow experience, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) mentions the alternation between two states and makes way for reflection’s importance. Writing about an “at first apparently paradoxical relationship,” he muses:

It almost seems that occasionally giving up self-consciousness is necessary for building a strong self-concept. Why this should be so is fairly clear. In flow a person is challenged to do her best, and must constantly improve her skills. At the time, she doesn’t have the opportunity to reflect on what this means in terms of the self... But afterward, when the activity is over and self-consciousness has a chance to resume, the self that the person reflects upon is not the same self that existed before the flow experience: it is now enriched by new skills and fresh achievements (p. 65-66).

Here, Csikszentmihalyi marshals reflection as a state where one can realize the growth occurring during flow. Reflection, this awareness of what growth is occurring/has occurred, is unavailable to the person in the flow condition, thus a break from flow and a move to reflection at the very least serves the necessity of reacquainting the person with their new and updated self. One might

surmise that coming to realize this self-growth and know oneself is important prior to engaging another flow experience, but even so this keeps the focus on flow, relegating reflection to a subordinate role. We also remain in the realm of skills and accomplishments here or, in game studies terms, resources and goals—there is little place for moral engagement mentioned in this particular kind of self-growth. I might suggest, however, that this role is mirrored: just as breaks in flow can serve as a space for processing the growth experienced during flow in preparation for some future flow state, flow itself might serve as a kind of necessary break from reflection in preparation for some future state of reflection.

There is another precedent in flow research for considering the pauses in flow or the states that bookend flow before and after. Sato (1988) in his study of flow in Japanese motorcycle gangs, dedicates some time to exploring the “intermissions” during a motorcycle run (p. 97), as well as the thoughts of the riders before and after a run, instead of focusing solely on the flow experience itself. Sato describes the intermissions as “necessary because a run requires a high degree of concentration and tension,” but they serve a number of other functions besides recuperation (p. 97). Each resting period is also a time to engage socially with the community, to discuss what happened in the last part of the run, to gather information, and to plan the next phase (p. 97). While much of this description does seem goal-focused, it is important to note that these intermissions also go beyond the goals of any particular run towards building the identities of the gang members and the community as a whole. This a community built around an activity, but conscious engagement with that community occurs in the spaces between the activity—both are crucial. Sato’s descriptions of thoughts before and after a run, as opposed to during the intermissions, demonstrate some reflection on the consequences of actions taken and the danger

faced—reflection that is subsumed during the flow of the actual run. In a similar manner, players might be prompted to stop and reflect about the actions they were taking during a flow state.

I have made the case for reflection's contribution to beneficial portions of the flow state; now, I want to argue that the inverse is also true and flow can have a positive impact on reflection. To make this argument, I will utilize modern interpretations of a theory begun by another psychologist who was concerned with the maintenance and growth of the self, as well as the distinction and relationship between thoughts and actions—Piaget. While most people associate Piaget exclusively with his studies in child developmental psychology, neo-Piagetian theorists call attention to the broader applicability of his project and his oft-ignored focus on epistemology (Müller, Carpendale, & Smith, 2009). Piaget's constructivist epistemology looks at the formation of knowledge alongside action in "structures that emerge as any knowing subject interacts with the world," as Müller, Carpendale, and Smith put it (p. 3-4). Readings of Piaget's work emphasizing his epistemology will thus offer theoretical support to my argument that the action state of flow goes hand in hand with reflection, each benefitting from (and beneficial to) the other. Theories of cognitive growth in this vein pave the way for me to conceive reflection on an equal footing that Csikszentmihalyi's theories never quite allow on their own. Finally, Piagetian theories on the development of norms in this fashion connect them directly to moral development in a manner consistent with my theoretical grounding in the ethics of Nussbaum.

One of the key concepts of Piaget's model of cognitive development, equilibration, puts action and thought hand in hand while also falling more in line with my focus on the alternation of the two over time. Equilibration fits quite well with Csikszentmihalyi's emphasis on self-growth and overcoming psychic entropy. As Boom (2009) explains, over the course of his work Piaget advanced a theory for cognitive development as "a succession of constructions and

constant elaborations of novel structures... a process that improves existing structures and replaces temporally achieved equilibria through re-equilibrations” (p. 132). We see here some commonality in the emphasis on novelty, and on not only maintaining but also improving the self (or cognitive structures in Piaget’s case). However, this also implies an ongoing, iterative process of construction over time rather than the single momentary leaps Csikszentmihalyi discusses. Boom (2009) offers the most simple layman’s definition for equilibration as “the tendency of the subject to develop increasing control over experience,” where “experience involves all exchanges with the environment outside the body,” and “tendency is used because Piaget proposed that the development of cognitive functioning is inherent... without any requirement for external rewards” (p. 132-133). Piaget’s theories, in this sense, very much imply an embodied cognition at least partially engaged through action rather than a Cartesian dualism.<sup>4</sup> Most importantly, in terms of addressing the mind/body problem, Boom clears up the issue of knowledge in Piaget, arguing that, “for Piaget the organism is in constant interaction with its environment, and the subject is also constantly exercising its schemes, as in having them interacting with each other” (p. 135). The development of cognitive schemes and their interaction with each other has a place of prominence alongside action, and such development involves an ongoing and repeating process. While most of Piaget’s research in this area focuses on cognitive structures crucial to development, if we apply these ideas to knowledge structures and norms such as Smith (2009) discusses, they offer a useful lens to reading the tandem workings of action and reflection.

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<sup>4</sup> Also noteworthy is the move away from distinct rewards for motivation. Boom addresses some challenges to the teleology, as well as other aspects of Piagetian theory in the intervening years, but argues that the theory of cognitive development remains compelling, as “no fixed endpoint for cognitive development is implied” (p. 134).

The joining of flow and equilibration theory, signaling one use of reflection and its interaction with flow, comes with Boom's (2009) conception of Piaget's "equilibration... as self-organization" (p. 136). As Boom notes, conceiving the self as a growing system, "the system must maintain its identity and stability while at the same time modifying itself and enlarging itself" (p. 136). If we accept Csikszentmihalyi's ideas of flow as self-growth, we might view one important function of reflection as a coming to terms with one's identity, in a manner similar to what was discussed previously regarding breaks from the flow state—growth and identity very much the tension in Piaget as well. Yet identity is not the only important function. Boom describes the process of encountering "resistance" and reacting to it with a "regulation," which we can think of in a way as challenges and skills, but more importantly Boom notes that facing "resistance... can, from the point of view of the cognitive structure involved, be described as a perturbation or disturbance of that structure" and require it to be reconstituted (p. 139). The process of resistance and regulation described here can in some sense account for the self-growth associated with flow, but the actual moments of meeting and overcoming (or failing to overcome) resistance are not the end of the process.

Boom's next move opens consideration of a unique role for reflection that echoes my concern for value associations. Here, the line of argument intersects the "stage theory" many associate with Piaget. As typically conceived, Jarrold and Tam (2011) note, "Piaget's theory of cognitive development is characterized by the notion that individuals, from infancy to early adulthood, pass through discrete stages each involving a qualitatively different form of mental representation," but their research complicates the notion of such changes being strictly tied to certain ages (p. 190-191). In fact, many Neo-Piagetian theorists assert that the commonly accepted simple view of stage theory takes it beyond Piaget's intentions (Boom 2009, Kesselring

2009, Müller, Carpendale, & Smith 2009, Smith 2009, Valsiner 1992). As Valsiner (1992) explains, “Piaget’s stage account of development often becomes explanatory in its use in psychological discourse, despite the fact that Piaget’s own explanation of development is present elsewhere—in his equilibrium theory” (p. 66). We need not consider the typical emphasis of stage theory in full, then, but rather situate it in the context of the equilibrium theory addressed above. Here, stages serve the purpose of tracking whether particular cognitive structures of the self are merely being maintained through these adaptations (within-stage) or whether we see growth and novelty (a new stage). The process of resistance and regulation is one of “within-stage” adaptation, Boom (2009) notes, but he proposes that in Piaget’s theory it does not account for development to a qualitatively new stage of the cognitive structures—for the new stage we must consider Piaget’s theory of “reflecting abstraction” (p. 143). For the purposes of my argument, the notion of adaptations within or between stages offer an analogy for thinking about reflection as maintaining the self in response to the perturbations of flow (which places the importance on flow) or as a means of changing thought structures (which places more importance on reflection).

Reflecting abstraction offers theoretical backing for the more significant potential impact of reflection. Boom lays the groundwork for the theory with the following consideration:

If we reflect on something, we take something we did or something we observed in a prereflexive manner out of its normal context by thinking about it. Usually this implies that we become conscious of what is involved in what we at first took for granted. By thinking about it, we may see new connections and new distinctions (p. 143).

This is a simplistic description of the process of reflecting abstractions, which as a whole aims to have explanatory power beyond the workings of an adult mind presented here, but for the purposes of reflection in games we need not consider developmental processes in young children or non-human organisms. The formation of novel constructs here is one of generalizing as well

as creating new associations. As Campbell (2009) puts it, “our explicit understanding of something about our actions is not a mere copy of our previous cognitive structure, and to function properly it needs to be integrated with other new structures at the higher level” (p. 153). In terms of my project, weighing different valuescapes and considering their associations and conflicts would be one example of this. Boom’s (2009) understanding of reflection’s necessity comes out of the restructuring needed to account for these newly realized associations and distinctions (p. 144). Thus, while reflection might sometimes operate in service to flow, it has its own important function, and Boom suggests that while the more typical adaptations (like you might see coming out of a flow state) have no direct causal relation to reflecting abstractions, incidents of one should increase with incidents of the other.

Combined with the iterative process of equilibration and re-equilibration, we can take from the above that a cycle of flow/action and reflection upon said action is necessary for overall cognitive development—either continual adaptation within structures as self-growth in meeting skills and challenges, or the development of new structures through reflection. Piaget was also concerned with moral development through these processes, particularly the development of norms. As Smith (2009) notes, for Piaget the development of norms goes hand in hand with action, since they are initially developed “implicit” in actions, but are made “explicit” through reflection (p. 79). The moral work is done in acknowledging “obligations” and “reasons” surrounding actions past and future (p. 79). Although Piagetian theorists don’t take this step, I would here call back to Nussbaum and her emphasis on moral work lying not in the choice itself, but in how one considers and weighs the conflicting values called forth by the choice. Reflection is key, but we would not arrive at these heightened moments of reflection if not for a continuous cycle of both action and reflection for both standard and novel cognitive adaptations.

In this chapter, I made the case for reflection as a distinct state players may experience during games, set apart from flow and other action states such as anxiety, grinding, and compulsion loops. Reflection requires both the opportunity of a pause free from extreme demands of action and value cues to reflect upon within this pause; thus, it cannot overlap with states of flow or anxiety and is unlikely to overlap with grinding or compulsion loops as they are commonly executed in game design. Through a careful reading of Csikszentmihalyi's original concept of flow, I have sought to expose the misconceived fetishization of flow in game studies and to decenter flow so that we might become aware of the interactions and shifts between experiential states during play. The state of reflection that occurs during pauses in the flow of action holds importance partially through the alternation of flow and action states, and I have shown how even Csikszentmihalyi agrees to this importance. While Csikszentmihalyi considers reflection in service to flow in these interactions, I have utilized the readings of neo-Piagetian theorists to propose that the interaction works both ways. Reflection may indeed serve to realize the growth induced by flow but, more than merely reconstituting identity, reflection itself offers a site of growth to a new stage of cognitive structures. The growth experienced in flow would not theoretically occur again unless interspersed with reflection, and the growth experienced during reflection requires the perturbations that come from periods of action. In the following chapters I will offer a more concrete analysis that follows from this theory, demonstrating particular techniques in mainstream games for managing the alternation of pause and action while also offering value cues for players to reflect upon in building new cognitive constructs and associations.



### 3 CHAPTER TWO: STRUCTURING MORAL REFLECTION THROUGH EVENTS

The alternating pattern of action and pause leads players to points of moral reflection in a number of ways, but all involve building or retrieving value associations through memory. The temporal experience, the pacing of a game, must be examined to identify where points of reflection may occur. The way a game prompts the player to construct certain valuescapes, both over the broad course of the game and within smaller-scale segments of gameplay, also owes much to the game's temporal structure. In theorizing the formation of these valuescapes over time and moving beyond current research on time in game studies, I ground my analysis in memory research—particularly emotionally strengthened associations developed through episodic memory and the importance of repetition to strengthening or altering memory traces. Nussbaum, one of the few scholars to explicitly address the impact of temporal thinking on our capacity for ethics, justifies time as a focal point, which I then turn to memory research to guide my analysis of. This chapter focuses on how games build points of reflection through the pacing of events (action or cutscenes) in discrete segments of gameplay. However, the premise of valuescapes formed over time in the memory, strengthened and altered through successive repetitions and emotional engagement, also functions over the full course of a game (as the next chapter will reveal).

#### 3.1 Time, Memory, and Reflection

Temporality plays an integral role in my approach to ethics in games, not only due to the interaction between reflection and flow, but also because temporal thinking and the workings of memory are linked to emotion and value judgments, as Nussbaum suggests. In highlighting the importance of time in the midst of her discussion of ethics, Nussbaum reveals ways of looking at time beyond tracking goals ahead or remembering goals achieved. Nussbaum (2001b) upholds

the capacity for “*temporal thinking*—for memory, for expectation, for conceiving of a life as a temporal process,” as foundational to the capacity for emotions and ethics her work seeks to understand (p. 144-145). She connects temporal thinking with the aptitude for generalization, and notes several key ideas that the human capacity for these things allows:

Thoughts of potential import to emotional and moral life... for example, the idea of membership in a distinctive group with a distinctive history, perhaps a history of glorious deeds, perhaps a history of oppression; the idea of being a member of a species that has done great evil and can also do what is right; the idea of planning and striving for the realization of national or global justice; the idea that certain calamities are the common lot of one's species (p. 145).

Temporal thinking allows for such powerful ethical considerations on a grand scale. The games I use for my case studies call most of these to the player's mind (within the more bounded space of the game's fictional world, of course). Yet, more importantly, Nussbaum argues that the nature of our temporal thinking ultimately influences our self-concept, which in turn influences the shape of our emotions and our ethical stance toward others and toward the world, as “the way we see ourselves depends upon our innate cognitive and perceptual and integrative capacities, but also on our specific conceptions of temporality, of causality,” and “the emotions' eudaimonistic character rests upon a sense of the self” (p. 147). We should not discount the use of time as a marker of past achievements and future goals, but neither should we overlook its role in who we are and how we approach the world. Our capacity for memory, the ethics that memory allows, and our consideration of future actions based on memory are all key to how I would like to approach the workings of time in games.

If temporal thinking does play a foundational role in our capacity for ethics, our concept of the self, and our ability to theorize on the motivations and ethics of others, as Nussbaum suggests, then it stands to reason that analyzing how games lay out particular experiences of time for us should prove a worthwhile endeavor. I argue that temporal pacing allows the construction

of valuescapes and their reinforcement through repetition and emotional engagement throughout the game, while in discrete segments of gameplay it may be manipulated to emphasize certain pauses where poignant points of reflection might occur. To make this argument, I move beyond the scope of Nussbaum's focus on the temporal experience, though I am indebted to her for highlighting its importance. Cognitive memory research serves as my guide towards a more focused analysis of time in this chapter, as it offers a detailed view of the workings of temporal experience in the human mind which I can then apply to specific case studies.

The process of memory leads us over time to construct ethical landscapes of values associated with a given text and to relate those values to a number of other values formed in other contexts. It also allows us to project based on those values, and to alter our view of them in response to ongoing events and repeated encounters with them. As McGaugh (2003) puts it, "It is our memory that enables us to value everything else we possess... Memory is the 'glue' of our personal existence" (p. 2). Our memories shape our ongoing approach to the world around us, sometimes without us even realizing it (Hertel 2004, Kelley & Lindsay 1996, Kensinger 2009). While we may be more aware of our moral reflection at the most poignant points of reflection, many important steps to formulating the world of valuescapes we are dealing with in any particular game may go unnoticed by the average player. However, all such moments--whether they are especially striking or not—are important to our overall moral and emotional engagement with a game. We have to understand the importance of a pattern of events (both within discrete segments of gameplay and across the entire scope of a game) alongside the pauses for reflection between them, and cognitive memory research provides a framework for discussing this in the context of memory encoding and recall.

The type of memory McGaugh discusses above is episodic or autobiographical memory. Episodic memory will be important to my argument due to its role in forming associations over time, as well as its role in emotional engagement. As Kraft (2004) describes it, an episodic memory “represents the *original phenomenal experience*” in sensory memories and emotions that “are then integrated into a narrative, episodic construction of events” (p. 352). Ryan, Hoscheidt, and Nadel (2008) distinguish episodic/autobiographical memory from semantic memory, noting that, “it is personal, emotional, populated with players and specific places, imbued with detail, and... has relevance to our sense of self and the meaning of our lives” (p. 5). We should note the similarity between this description of episodic memory and Nussbaum’s language in arguing temporal thinking as a requirement for ethics. Indeed, Margalit (2002) calls episodic memory “the paradigm case for an ethics of memory” (p. 107). It should come as no surprise that here, among the emotion-laden memories through which we organize our self-concept and our life experience, is where we might find the multitude of conflicting values that arise out of that experience—our valuescapes.

Through episodic memory, our valuescapes are continually activated and updated as we move through life, or through a video game. I am interested primarily in how particular memories are activated, revisited, and revised through repetition at what I call points of reflection spaced throughout the game—that is, in the context of memory research, the formation and activation of memory traces. Ryan, Hoscheidt, and Nadel (2008) propose that, “the contents of consciousness will always include, to varying degrees, the experience that is currently happening, recollections of prior similar or related events, and relevant semantic knowledge” (p. 13). In their view, episodic memories of some sort would always be operative in consciousness, though how prevalent they are might change from moment to moment (for example, in a flow

state such memories would likely be minimally present only as they are relevant to the task at hand). The construction of valuescapes, however, occurs with more conscious repetition over time of particular value associations—the strengthening and/or altering of memory traces.

Scholars acknowledge that a memory is to some extent malleable when re-activated (McGaugh, 2003, p. 91; Nadel, Hupbach, Hardy, & Gomez, 2008, p.45; Reisberg & Huer, 2004, p. 32). As Ryan, Hoscheidt, and Nadel (2008) explain:

Each time an event is recollected, an updated trace is created that incorporates information from the old trace, but now includes elements of the new retrieval episode, resulting in traces that are both strengthened and expanded... Memory traces involve a network of regions throughout the brain that are also strengthened and expanded with retrieval, reactivation, and re-encoding... The fundamental conclusion... is that every act of encoding engages processes akin to retrieval, and every act of retrieval engages processes akin to encoding (p. 12-13).<sup>5</sup>

Given the malleability of memory and the connection between encoding and retrieval processes, that each instance of activating a memory trace could expand and strengthen the memory, this research supports my theory of points of reflection as moments where valuescapes may be simultaneously constructed, recalled, and revised. Repetition of cues within a game that prompt recollection of prior events—such as characters, places, narrative threads, or themes—do not, then, serve merely as reminders of progress or plot points. They are possible activation points for the (re)construction of our valuescapes, and as such should always be considered with respect to their place in the broader ongoing pattern of points of reflection spread throughout the game.

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<sup>5</sup> Ryan, Hoscheidt, and Nadel are referring here to Multiple Trace Theory (MTT). While not the only theory on memory traces, it is an established theory that falls in line with my own observations and supports the role valuescapes might play in the process.

In addition to its role in building and revisiting values over time, episodic memory also connects to emotion. Emotion can enhance the salience of memory, can interact with both encoding and retrieval processes, and, if we consider Nussbaum's proposition that emotions are value judgments, may further connect values to the realm of memory. Numerous studies suggest a strong link between emotions and the memory process (Allen, Kaut, & Lord, 2008; Kensinger, 2009; Kraft, 2004; Reisberg & Heuer 2004). Allen, Kaut, and Lord (2008) argue that emotions should be considered as important "contextual cues" in episodic memory research. Kensinger (2009) notes that we are more likely to remember emotional experiences in the long term (p. 52-53). McGaugh (2003) addresses this effect of emotions, acknowledging that, "emotionally intense experiences are typically recalled often" and as such "repeated rehearsal... may influence the durability of the memories," but he nevertheless argues, "emotionally arousing experiences do not need to be rehearsed in order to be well remembered" (p. 8). This research suggests benefits for game designers to incorporate emotional elements not only as an end in itself but also as a tool for shaping the experience of the player and the game's impact. Furthermore, it suggests that repeating cues to prompt the player to revisit previous experiences in the game may be useful beyond simply reminding the player or helping them remember key information, as studies suggest memories can to some extent reinstate the emotions attached to them (Allen, Kaut, & Lord, 2008; Kraft, 2004).

The true impact of the intersection between memory and emotion lies in the web of connections tied together by emotionally salient memories and our tendency to reflect on these memories to the point of altering our values and future approaches to the world. Kensinger (2009) points out that, "emotional stimuli tend to be more highly *related* to one another, they tend to be more *distinct*, and individuals are more likely to carry out *elaborative* processes when

the stimuli are encountered” (p. 53). From the moment they are processed, these emotional memories, are on track to be enhanced by such tendencies, to form strong connections amongst stimuli, and to have a greater impact on the mind than other kinds of memories. These strong associations are in some sense valuescapes as they are attached to cues in the game world, and a point of reflection would certainly fall under the purview of elaborative processes. Indeed, we could look at many of these elaborations in relation to Boom’s (2009) discussion of improving knowledge structures or giving rise to novel structures in Piagetian theory discussed previously. Many points of reflection may be constructing and improving upon existing knowledge structures (the most important for my analysis being norm/value structures) in an ongoing iterative process, while occasionally a particularly poignant point of reflection will prompt the player to think of these associations in a new context to form novel structures and new connections. This seems most likely to occur with memories that lend themselves to such elaboration and are already prone to form connections with other memories in the mind.

Emotional memories are key to value associations, and key to the importance of repeated moments of reflection spread throughout a game. Kensinger (2009) argues that the encoding of emotional items involves “‘deep’ encoding operations that focus on the meanings of information,” which “tend to produce a higher likelihood of later retrieval” (p. 56). Associations are being formed and taken into account from the moment of encoding and the memory is more likely to be rehearsed later. As Kensinger suggests:

We are likely to try to find meaning in emotional experiences. We are likely to think about the experience’s broader significance to our personal lives or to our broader environment. We may try to reappraise the meaning of an event’s experience to make it more or less emotionally evocative (p. 56-57).

A particularly salient memory in a game would thus be accompanied in short order by some consideration of its associations and significance beyond that moment—essentially, it would require or inspire a moment of reflection. Such a memory would in my view add to the valuescapes the player is always constructing and may be more likely to be periodically re-triggered and re-evaluated.

These reflections on emotional memories and their associations would not be merely of retrospective significance, however. By structuring how we navigate our valuescapes and what we find important, such reflection can potentially impact who we are and how we approach the world. Reisberg and Heuer (2004) discuss how emotional memories are “more compelling in gauging the future,” and not only the memories but also the act of remembering them (p. 30). Drawing the study of autobiography alongside their own approach, they note that, “there is ample discussion of how a recollection shapes someone’s values or character and... how the qualities of a remembered event can compel someone to action, or fail to” (p. 30). Instilling values by way of forming memories at points of reflection and repeatedly triggering them, as I argue occurs over the course of a game, would in this way continuously shape the player’s own character and future approach to the game world (at least within the context of the game, though possibly beyond).

The preceding theoretical discussion sets the stage for a detailed analysis of gameplay. Distinguishing the nuance of Csikszentmihalyi’s flow theory makes way for understanding the interrelation of action and reflection. A reading of neo-Piagetian theory against Csikszentmihalyi’s flow allows us to see action and reflection operating together with equal contribution in creating the self—our knowledge structures, norms, and, by extension, our value associations. Nussbaum ties the ethics of these values to emotions, time, and memory. Finally,



memory research reveals how repetition and emotional engagement create and allow for the alteration and advancement of lasting value structures. Memory research also suggests the importance of the particular arrangement of action sequences and points of reflection. Later chapters will deal with the broader course of the game in the values attached to and evolving with characters, or how the very spaces of the game world find themselves imbued with values, but this chapter looks at a smaller unit of analysis that goes into the processing discussed in those later chapters.

Bringing this theory to bear on a case study, I will look at the temporal structures of a game. I will describe the common patterns of the player's experience of time in the game, then move to an in-depth analysis of a precise arrangement of events. By events, I mean individual segments of gameplay action or points of reflection (here in the form of cutscenes) which require the player's attention, especially toward key gameplay goals or processing narrative/affective information. A segment of combat, solving a puzzle, encountering a cutscene, or coming across a particularly striking place or object in the game world would be an event. As these examples reveal, for my purposes events can be active or reflective, anything from merely something occurring in the player's view which captures their attention to something happening to the player and necessitating action. The arrangement of events reveals at what points values may be communicated and/or revisited (in reflective events), as well as the relationship between those points and the active events of surrounding gameplay. We must, however, consider the pacing as well as the arrangement. Thus, I will discuss both the time ranges of action sequences and cutscenes and how the particular arrangement of these events may develop a player's valuescapes or emphasize certain points of reflection as more emotionally engaging than others.

### 3.2 Case Study from *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings*

I turn to *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* for a case study because it serves as an exemplar of its genre—it uses techniques of gameplay, narrative, and pacing that are common to single-player RPGs, but does so consistently and effectively to prompt reflection on values. The *Witcher* series of games is a European fantasy series based on a set of novels and short stories by Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski, and it presents a world of mostly familiar fantasy tropes save for the main character, Geralt, who belongs to a fading order of magically mutated monster hunters who roam a world that views them with suspicion, fear, and awe. The series breaks from more traditional fantasy tropes found in many other games in important ways: the hero often finds himself in service to morally gray (if not outright evil) people and organizations, people do not always want to be saved, and many times the heroes efforts are for naught. Each game emphasizes a world of conflicting values, and thus serves as a particularly interesting case study for an analysis of ethics in games. I will focus on the second game in the series because the first game was not popular enough to be considered within the scope I set for the project's objects of study, while the third adds an open-world aspect to its gameplay that has additional effects on the game's pacing. *The Witcher 2* serves as an exemplary single-player RPG that enables me to isolate for analysis the pacing of action and reflection. *The Witcher 2* also distinguishes itself in that, more than even the other games of the series, it offers few good endings. Almost every major decision in *The Witcher 2* involves choosing an action that is right by some values the player likely holds but wrong by others. Thus, it is an excellent case study for the ethics Nussbaum proposes as manifesting not in making a correct choice but rather in deliberation about the choice.

There are three prominent temporal patterns in *The Witcher 2*, similar to what might be found in many games of the genre. A more free-form structure with relationships over a longer period of time is formed by the alternation between the temporal pattern of the game's hubs—central locations such as towns or camps where the majority of quests are given and received and a large portion of cutscene dialogue takes place—and the temporal pattern of what I will call the game's wilderness where exploration happens and danger is more commonly faced. Within game hubs, the player is likely to be more at ease, though there is still action in the form of movement and strategic resource management, and occasionally conflict will take place unexpectedly (though combat in hubs is rare and can often be avoided in some way). The temporal pattern in hubs usually involves cutscenes featuring many dialogue options interspersed with periods of navigation and exploration. The exploration within a game's hubs tends to be more leisurely, an exploration of setting, story, and available characters to engage with. Most of a game's quests will begin within hubs, and end there as well after the player has accomplished some task, and hubs are where the resources gathered in other areas of the game are looked over, spent, sold, and/or enhanced. Given a hub's more free-form patterning of time, likely experienced quite differently by each player, hubs will not be my primary focus for the present analysis except as they relate to other patterns. I will discuss hubs in more detail in their own right in the fourth chapter on values in game spaces.

Wilderness exploration, on the other hand, is generally patterned into navigation and exploration with lengthy periods of action and possible flow (particularly as the player nears objectives), only occasionally punctuated by pauses in the action prompted by special cutscenes or striking points of interest in the environment. I term this pattern of time “wilderness” because it evokes a frontier of exploration where danger is never very far away, though it could be

experienced anywhere from literal wilderness to the catacombs under a city, or even an untamed area of outer space in a science fiction game. In most RPGs this pattern involves frequent combat and frequent navigational challenges while searching for loot and resources of various kinds, therefore the pattern lends itself to flow and the player might experience entire swaths of the area full of fast-paced action. In this way, the wilderness is quite distinct from the slower pace of the hubs above. Most quests in *The Witcher 2*, as in most RPGs, begin in hubs and may be completed on the player's own time scale in the wilderness (though there are occasionally quests found and completed in hubs). Thus, a commonality between hubs and wilderness patterns lies in their temporal indeterminacy—they are likely experienced quite differently by different players. While they remain important to the patterning of action and reflection across the entire course of a game, then, wilderness and hub experiences alike are ill-suited to the kind of micro-level analysis of event patterning I undertake in this chapter.

Though all three patterns of temporal experience are integral to the experience of a game, the third type serves as the focus of my argument in this chapter. In many ways, this third pattern operates as the primary conveyor of key emotional moments in many RPGs. This temporal mode, which I will call the chain quest, sees cutscenes alternating with action in a more tightly woven pattern. While some chain quest patterns may play out in different ways based on choices made, the game prescribes a general order and pacing of events within them, thus making them useful for describing an experience of temporal patterning likely shared by all players (and thus the term, “chain”). A feature of many (though not all) modern RPGs, the chain quest pattern usually occurs during quests important to the overarching plot or themes of the game. While players encounter the chain quest much less than the other temporal patterns, the fact that it appears at some of the most emotionally charged and plot-relevant moments makes it worthy of

focus for any analysis of ethics in RPGs. This patterning of time generally begins with a cutscene, followed by intense action interrupted by one or more other cutscenes, and closing on a final cutscene. The initial cutscene, which I shall call a contextualizing cutscene, puts the upcoming action into context, though this means more than simply establishing gameplay goals. The contextualizing cutscene will often set up the values the quest will engage, or draw on themes and values encountered earlier in the game, connecting them to what is yet to come, though even in its reflection it is forward-looking—a reflection/projection. The central cutscenes punctuate the action, most often beginning in between sections of combat, but occasionally in the midst of active navigation of the game’s landscape, and they are generally focused on a small set of plot points and values. The pattern typically closes on a lengthy cutscene that emphasizes how the game world has changed, which may either prompt the player to reflect on the past or project into the future. Thus, a typical layout for the chain quest pattern would be: contextualizing cutscene→action→punctuating cutscene →action → punctuating cutscene→action→re-contextualizing cutscene, though how long each of these sequences is and what action takes place within may affect the impact and emphasis of the pattern.

The amount of time in any of these segments will vary from quest to quest, and thus even within this pattern it is important to consider the particular pacing and structure for that quest, which I will refer to as its pacing structure. For example, the length of any given punctuating cutscene, as well as the length of action sequences surrounding it, may strengthen its impact. Long action sequences and punctuating cutscenes might invite ongoing reflection and an involved construction of valuescapes, whereas a series of quick action and punctuating cutscenes in the middle of this pattern might together build a sense of urgency that heightens the impact of a later punctuating cutscene and/or the recontextualizing cutscene. I will be discussing three

particular types of pacing in the chain quest pattern, each using the layout and length of sequences to different effect with regard to points of reflection and valuescapes.<sup>6</sup> First, I will discuss how evenly spaced action and cutscene sequences can lead the player to construct a general set of valuescapes<sup>7</sup>, similar to establishing the narrative setting, or the overview map of a space, but for values as opposed to generic elements or physical representations. We can think of this as an example of constructive pacing. Of course, as these valuescapes are revealed and constructed in the player's mind they may identify certain clashes of values, just as when looking at a landscape one might spot the points where two different features clash, but such realization is more through comparison between sequences rather than strictly highlighted within one sequence. The second instance I analyze demonstrates how through shortening most of the sequences in the pattern except two or three, the game can hone in on a particular clash of values and follow that up with a more engaging point of reflection on that conflict. I will call this emphatic pacing. While the first instance is like a slow approach to a broad vista, or the contemplation of a landscape painting, emphatic pacing is like riding a train, catching glimpses of a compelling feature of the landscape which stands out all the more in comparison to the blur of hills in between. Finally, I will show how the pattern can emphasize certain sequences that prompt the player to recall and reflect upon values previously introduced in the game outside the pattern—what I call referential pacing. These are more likely to trigger reflections upon past reflections (novel structures and associations if we are to return to Piagetian theory). I do not

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<sup>6</sup> This list is by no means meant to be an exhaustive typology, but I will give each example of pacing type a label for the sake of clarity. I would encourage the reader to focus on the particularity of the arrangement and pacing of events within the examples, however.

<sup>7</sup> Recall that I will be discussing a valuescape as a set of values that share the same or related triggers. Thus, all RPGs have more than one valuescape, but a valuescape can and usually does involve multiple different elements within the game.

assert that these are the only sequence patterns a game might use, nor that they even stand as formal patterns as such. Their importance to my argument lies in their demonstration of the variety of effects that may be produced from altering the pace of moments and events in particular ways. With these examples, we see the value of seeking out points of reflection moment by moment and understanding their place within the surrounding action.

The *Witcher 2* introduces the player to the chain quest pattern with the first main quest of the prologue, which diegetically takes place in a flashback that will ultimately contextualize where Geralt now finds himself and what his driving motivations will be going forward. The particular execution of constructive pacing here, with evenly spaced lengthy cutscenes and actions sequences, does not give special emphasis to any scene of conflict but rather prompts an ongoing construction of the broader valuescapes of the game.<sup>8</sup> Then, through repetition both within this quest and in the game as a whole to follow, the game reinforces these values in the mind of the player, gives them more nuance, and begins to reveal their conflicts. Geralt is tasked with accompanying King Foltest and guarding him as his forces besiege an upstart noble's castle to stop an opposing claim to the throne. The most pressing action goals of the player are set up here and given narrative justification, and by the end the driving narrative going forward—clearing Geralt's name after being accused of killing Foltest—will be established leading into the diegetic present of the game. In punctuating cutscenes along the way, however, the constructive pacing establishes key moral themes that will develop more fully as the game continues.

The contextualizing cutscene establishes where the player's character, Geralt, finds himself in the world, as well as the characteristics of key figures to the plot. In addition to laying

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<sup>8</sup> I discuss valuescapes as plural here because this chain quest establishes the overarching themes of the game, thus multiple valuescapes. Theoretically, however, it might be possible for this type of pacing to merely reveal a singular valuescape.

out the plan of battle and its goals, Foltest's opening cutscene and dialogue establish his key characteristics. He is brave, standing tall amid the impacts of siege weaponry. He addresses his men and does not stand on ceremony, remembering the names of even more lowly soldiers from previous battles. He expresses actual care for his bastard children and refuses to let folks call them bastards; he merely doesn't want them to be used by their mother's family against him. Ultimately the impression we are left with is a competent leader capable of actual care and compassion. The scene calls on a fairly established set of cultural values for what makes a praiseworthy leader, while lending some personal connection in the manner those values are revealed—gathered through conversations rather than explicitly told. This is important to the player actually caring about Foltest's death, as well as to the player's opinion of Geralt's role in the battle. There are broader political machinations that will be important to the plot introduced here with a hostile exchange between Foltest and an ambassador, but the key work of this scene is to establish Foltest's character and, by extension, the character of those in his service at the moment including the PC.

Following the contextualizing cutscene, the player will navigate the battlements with Foltest as more of his character is revealed, reiterating the characteristics described above, though with slightly more interactivity on the part of the player. After another cutscene to re-establish the diegetic chronology of the flashback, the player will experience the first combat of the game. While not as frenzied as later combat, these prologue combat sequences nevertheless call the player to action and are likely to elicit some degree of physiological arousal and possibly even flow, breaking up the cutscenes. Each is also somewhat balanced with the sequences around it in terms of time—the length of action sequences or punctuating cutscenes does not vary abruptly. Aesthetically, the action sequences of the pattern are set apart most noticeably by the



free camera movement given the player, versus the directed camera movement of the cutscenes, as well as faster movement afforded Geralt and the louder sounds of combat and swell of dramatic music. There is a progression of difficulty following each punctuating cutscene, as Geralt is tasked with fighting tougher opponents with less help. Each of these action sequences involves goals established by punctuating cutscenes: capturing an enemy siege engine and turning it back on one of their own entrenched positions, infiltrating the battlements to face one of the nobles leading the rebels, breaching defenses while avoiding dragon attacks, navigating the town to uncover a secret tunnel into the monastery where Foltest's children are being held to let in the rest of the forces, and fleeing the dragon with Foltest as it returns. Most of these action sequences require constant attention and energy of the player, as they occur at a frenzied pace with few pauses (though clear goals).

While specific durations of the action sequences will vary by player, almost all the sequences in this quest range generally between two and six minutes—long enough to draw the player in to the flow of action or give a good pause during cutscenes, but not so long as to overwhelm the sequences just experienced. The one exception is towards the end where Geralt must uncover the secret tunnel in the town. Here, Geralt may choose to take time out of his mission to stop the depredations of soldiers on his own side and prevent them from slaughtering or extorting the townsfolk. This will lead to further punctuating cutscenes that are optional, though the area does not prove large enough for the time spent here to fully break from the pattern. The main purpose within the other action sequences is to provide an active challenge, achieve goals, and advance the plot. In the context of the constructive pacing, however, they serve the purpose of building and maintaining arousal and spacing out the points of reflection constituted in the punctuating cutscenes.

The punctuating cutscenes do not merely serve as a break from battle to establish the goals of the next action sequence, though that is one function. They also introduce and reiterate some of the key values of the game and in this sense are key points of moral reflection. The first two cutscenes return to the aspects of Foltest's character established in the contextualizing cutscene—his bravery, but concern for his men, and willingness to be merciful to those who are organizing against him. In doing this they may also serve to increase the player's attachment to Foltest and increase the impact of his death. Beyond these initial scenes, however, broader moral values dealt with in the game begin to emerge. After taking the outer defenses, a cutscene features Vernon Roche, Foltest's special forces commander and Geralt's interrogator outside the flashback. Roche comes across as capable, not overly harsh, yet extremely pragmatic. He reports without pause or emotional inflection that the army has taken the town and has begun looting, raping, and pillaging. Foltest only asks if the baroness is "unsoiled" but has no reaction to the other offenses. This scene contrasts the willingness to show mercy Foltest has indicated toward nobles thus far (and the relative courtesy Roche has shown Geralt) with a casual disregard to the plight of the common people, tacitly allowing horrible offenses to take place without even an expression of remorse. Another cutscene features a discussion of Roche torturing a priest for information. These two scenes precede the action scene exploring the town which the player may choose to interrupt in order to save some of the townfolks' lives, and that scene may offer an outlet for the dealing with the moral issues the player is prompted to reflect on here. The values that have begun to accumulate around Foltest and the war the player is complicit in are suddenly complicated in these later punctuating cutscenes. They may disrupt any attachment the player has towards Foltest and produce mixed feelings upon Foltest's death in the re-contextualizing cutscene at the end of the quest. Furthermore, these scenes introduce two broader themes of the

game: the plight of common folk in the face of misfortune or the actions of the powerful, and the necessity of dealing with those who do great evil in order to ultimately fulfill the player's goals.

The chain quest pattern in the first main quest of the game not only builds the setting in terms of narrative and values, but also structures the player's expectations of how these key points of reflection will be encountered. All good games teach the player their important rhythms and patterns early on, and this applies to moral reflection as well as to gameplay systems. Following the prologue, the game immediately reiterates this pattern, albeit in much shorter form, when the next chapter of the game begins. Such reinforcement acclimates the player to common patterns in the game and heightens their perceived importance.

While constructive pacing such as that discussed in the prologue prompts the player to begin mapping one or more valuescapes, emphatic pacing functions to highlight particular value conflicts, allowing them to stand out from the other events of the game. The game's Chapter One opening uses emphatic pacing in its chain quest pattern to emphasize points of reflection at two moments central to the competing values the player must navigate in the game. The shortened duration of sequences directly leading up to these moments, apart from a more lengthy intermission of a sort between the two, intensifies the effect. The longest punctuating cutscene of this sequence, which precedes the most intense action sequence, introduces the central conflict that drives the next two chapters of the game. The lengthy re-contextualizing cutscene heightens that conflict and gives it specificity within the immediate surroundings. In between, the cutscenes that convey these two crisis moments are separated by a period of more open navigation.

The sequence begins with a very quick contextualizing cutscene of barely a minute, in which Roche and Triss (a powerful sorceress, and Geralt's lover) discuss the strategy of doing

reconnaissance of the nearby town of Flotsam. This contextualizing cutscene hardly compares to the length of most such scenes, but its brevity serves the purpose of ushering the player quickly back into some semblance of action after the lengthy cutscene that closed the prologue.

Additional narrative information that might have occurred in such a scene may instead be overheard during a minute or two of slow navigation following the contextualizing cutscene, when the player will overhear Roche and Triss discuss that there is trouble in the nearby port of Flotsam and that Iorveth's commandos (a group of nonhuman rebels resisting human rule) control the forest, hinting at the central tension of the chapter which will soon be revealed. When Iorveth appears in the subsequent three-minute cutscene, he wastes no time accusing Roche of all manner of atrocities, calling him a "hunter of elves, murderer of women and children." Roche casually ignores these accusations, and Iorveth likewise responds to Roche's accusations of regicide to the effect that any dead human "king or beggar" is a good thing. The initial portion of the sequence should seem familiar in the player's mind in its likeness to the opening of the prologue, yet the relative brevity of the contextualizing cutscene and the navigation that precedes Iorveth's cutscene achieves a different effect—instead of the slow build of equally important moments and values, it highlights Iorveth's punctuating cutscene. Here the clash of values on both sides—Roche's and Iorveth's—presents itself within the scene, rather than strictly in comparison to previous scenes. Iorveth's almost genocidal anti-human sentiment, in combination with his implied relationship with the assassin that serves as the central villain thus far, will evoke few positive values. Yet, Roche's failure to dispute accusations about his role in the elves' ongoing persecution, combined with his previous callousness towards vulnerable populations depicted in the prologue, evokes few redeeming values either. The only values the scene prompts the player to reflect upon are in the negative—both sides demonstrate values of

bigotry and violence, the only positive of each side being its attempt to negate the specific evils of the other.

The next few sequences in the pattern distance the important clash of values just witnessed from the poignant scene revisiting them at the end of the chain quest pattern, completing the emphatic pacing. Fitting with my argument that important punctuating cutscenes are often followed by more intense action, the scene with Iorveth precedes the first combat of the chapter, as the player must battle off groups of Scoietel elves while escorting Roche and Triss to the safety of the port. While not incredibly difficult, this action sequence requires both combat skills and navigation, as Geralt must fight off the elves while remaining within the magical shield Triss is casting or else be struck down with arrows. These two to three minutes of combat are followed by another minute and a half punctuating cutscene, which in its brevity serves primarily to quickly move the player forward,<sup>9</sup> as the trio is briefly interrogated then allowed into the city, informed they might be in time to see “the execution.”

These intervening sequences also form a kind of symmetry with the sequences that preceded the first central point of reflection as they lead into a period of non-combat-oriented navigation alongside Roche and Triss. While some semblance of free-form control is restored here, the player will likely continue following Roche and Triss into town. Thus, the sequence largely still fits into the pattern though may vary in exact timing more from player to player. This sequence of movement, in allowing the player multiple available paths, may feel like a hub pattern, yet the game carefully structures the space and actions available within it to drive the player onward towards continuing the chain quest. Typical hub interactions are unavailable, and

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<sup>9</sup> This fulfills a similar function to the escalating action of a film towards a climax, but in this case it serves a moral function by separating and maintaining parallel emphasis on two key points of value conflict.

only the outskirts of the town may be navigated so the player will inevitably enter the town square and continue the chain quest pattern. The role this fills in the emphatic pacing, then, is similar to the beginning of this particular chain quest prior to the encounter with Iorveth.

All the characters in the village may be overheard discussing the hanging, further encouraging the player's trajectory to the square, where the next cutscene will be triggered. This punctuating cutscene is very brief, but establishes that two of Geralt's friends are among those set to be executed and sets the task of rescuing them. If the player has played the first game of the series, certain intertextual values might be triggered here—the friendship and good nature of the two characters set to be executed. Regardless, the brevity of the cutscene, rather than prompting deep reflection on that previous experience, would marshal it to affect an even greater sense of urgency. The player may accomplish the task of freeing Geralt's friends by approaching the gallows and successfully completing quick-time event sequences (QTEs involve pushing the correct buttons as they show on the screen, and serve as the game's mechanic for handling fist-fights) but not before an elven woman set to be hanged alongside Geralt's friends is killed. While some aspects of QTEs are similar to cutscenes in that control of the game's camera is taken away from the player, they are still decidedly action sequences, as they require such quick input in response to cues appearing on screen.

The sequence of action→quick cutscene→navigation→quick cutscene→action in this latter portion of the pattern makes it function somewhat differently from the pacing structure of the prologue described above. Rather than building a valuescape step by step, as with constructive pacing, emphatic pacing emphasizes the clash of values presented in the longer punctuating cutscene with Iorveth, giving the player some space before driving those values home in the poignant re-contextualizing cutscene that I will discuss in the following paragraph.

The game accomplishes such emphasis both through the urgency of pacing in these sequences and through their relative symmetry with the sequences that preceded Iorveth's cutscene. In this way, pacing becomes a tool even beyond the importance of alternating action and reflection I have previously pointed out. Maintaining a consistent pacing of action and reflection sequences through constructive pacing may be ideal for laying out multiple values (such as the world-building of the first example which occurs at the beginning of the game) but emphasis and deeper emotional and moral engagement requires varied pacing. The value clash evoked in the re-contextualizing cutscene that follows is crucial, but without the emphatic pacing its impact would be dulled and the parallels with the value clash between Roche and Iorveth would be less explicit.

Chapter One's opening chain quest ends with a re-contextualizing cutscene that does the important work of setting the gameplay goals for the chapter, but it also finishes the work of the emphatic pacing by striking a more visceral (and potentially personal) connection to the clash of values previously established. The lengthy four-minute cutscene introduces Loredo, the mayor of Flotsam—a character ostensibly on the side of Roche in that both represent the powers that be within the kingdom and both stand in opposition to the violent extremist revolutionaries led by Iorveth. Of course, Roche's frowning facial expressions and condescending tone make clear he does not feel that he and Loredo precisely the same. Loredo, a bigoted tyrant of a backwater town, likely evokes less sympathy from the player, but he represents the kind of evil that men like Roche allow to exist.<sup>10</sup> The scene starts with Loredo putting on a show of his authority,

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that while Loredo may be intentionally crafted to be an unlikable character, the potential exists for a player to personally feel sympathy for or agreement with Loredo's bigotry. Indeed, with references to terrorist acts committed by the Scoiettel, the game does not entirely shy away from inviting such prejudice despite numerous statements against it. These are

joining Geralt on the platform and with casual cruelty hanging the other accused criminal before quietly threatening to move on to Geralt's friends unless an arrangement is made. Cruelty, intimidation, and posturing are unlikely to be values the player holds in high regard, and a wholly negative valuescape may be further triggered with the threat to Geralt's friends (though this emotional engagement will vary considerably depending on whether it stems from intertextual prior experience of these characters or simply the intra-textual identification of these characters as friends in the cutscenes). Loredó's anti-elven sentiment manifests shortly thereafter as he turns and uses the king's recent death to stir up fear against the Scoiettel and gets the spectators to leave. Once the crowds are dispersed, Loredó agrees to free Geralt's friends temporarily and invites Geralt to his home later to discuss business. Again, his words convey a clear threat and ulterior motives. Geralt's friends thank him, there is talk of everyone meeting in the tavern, and the scene closes with the player left in the empty square next to the swinging corpses of dead elves on the gallows. The events of this re-contextualizing cutscene off-set Iorveth's scene and the attack by the Scoiattel, showing the cruelty of the local human government and laying out the setting and circumstances against which the clash of values will play out. Possibly, despite being attacked by the elves in the forest, the player might feel more strongly for Iorveth's side after seeing one supposed Scoiattel executed for spying and another elf executed for stealing. For the rest of this chapter, the gallows remains, the dead bodies surrounded by carrion in the town square as a reminder of this moment. By keeping most of the sequences short except for Iorveth's punctuating cutscene, the following combat, and this final re-contextualizing cutscene, the emphatic pacing effectively emphasizes the clashing values and

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some of the ways competing values are allowed or even encouraged to be held in conflict by the game.



drives the player here to this point of reflection where Geralt's current ally, Roche, is called into doubt, or at least the system associated with Roche. This moment utilizes methods beyond simply the patterning of time, of course. Here values become attached to certain characters, and the environment itself prompts some degree of pause and reflection. These techniques, discussed in future chapters, may act in tandem with the particular patterns of time through quest events discussed in this chapter.

The chain quest pattern does not stand completely separate from the player's experience of hubs or forays into the wilderness. The valuescapes built across all of these temporal patterns frequently interact. Often values established within the more open temporal pattern of the hubs will be triggered at points of reflection during the more emotionally heightened temporal sequences of a chain quest, resulting in what I call referential pacing. While constructive pacing builds an understanding of valuescapes with new information and emphatic pacing prompts reflection on particular value clashes (often through the parallel relationship between two or more emphasized points of reflection) referential pacing serves to prompt reflection on previous points of reflection—a kind of meta-reflection that involves re-assessing our previous map of a valuescape. Referential pacing accomplishes this meta-reflection by driving all events of the chain quest towards an especially poignant point of reflection. One of the possible closing quests of Chapter One demonstrates the use of this referential pacing to prompt reflection on values previously evoked elsewhere in the game, not from previous chain quests (or previous events in the same chain quest), but from experiences in the hub temporal pattern of the game. Following the initial sequences of the pattern, shorter sequences serve to build a momentum against which a later punctuating cutscene, one that explicitly references previous valuescape construction, stands out and serves as such a point of reflection.

The two-minute contextualizing cutscene for this quest begins when the player chooses to side with Vernon Roche, rather than Iorveth and his elves. Roche reveals his spies' information that Loredo is a traitor to the realm, making a deal with another kingdom, and proposes that Loredo must be dealt with before moving on. Roche suggests the possibility that those Loredo is in league with may be behind the assassination of Foltest that led to Geralt being framed initially. The values evoked in this cutscene are essentially values of justice and order on an impersonal scale, but they ultimately serve to frame the impetus for the gameplay goals of the quest more than they do a central value clash. If the player finds an emotional engagement with values during this cutscene, the memory of values previously attached to these characters is likely a factor, though the game makes little effort to evoke specific instances in the contextualizing cutscene. In the following action sequence, Geralt heads to the place where he is to infiltrate Loredo's mansion and waits until nightfall. The exact time it takes for Geralt to infiltrate will depend on the player's strategy and skill level here, and may involve sneaking around or open combat, but regardless is heavily action oriented apart from some overheard conversations such as one of Loredo's men chasing a prostitute through the gardens with ill intent. If the player deals with the man and either knocks out, fights, or sneaks around the other guards, Geralt will find this prostitute and initiate the first punctuating cutscene. The contextualizing cutscene and the action sequence that follows, both fairly typical lengths for sequences in this type of chain quest pattern, set up an expectation that the punctuating cutscene disrupts.

From this first punctuating cutscene, a shift in the length of sequences coincides with the introduction of a more emotionally engaging value clash. These sequences build towards a climax that will draw on a previously constructed valuescape in a point of reflection. In the minute-long cutscene, the girl warns Geralt that Ves, who was posing as a prostitute so she could

open a window for him, is in trouble, and that Geralt will need the keys from Loredo's mother in the basement to reach Loredo. She implores Geralt to "kill the bastard," saying that, "he should die slowly and painfully for all he did to us." Here we have a move from the broad value of justice towards the more emotionally engaging value set of combating and avenging a specific injustice—Loredo exploiting and hurting vulnerable people. Yet, while the cutscene signals this shift, the pattern does not allow the player long to consider it because the length of sequences as well as their content instills a sense of urgency. Following the first punctuating cutscene is a short period of action, anywhere from a few seconds to a minute depending on where the player seeks entrance, and then a brief punctuating cutscene showing Loredo leering at a tied up Ves. This cutscene is very quick, and transitions into action once again, this time with the goal of sneaking or fighting through the house to find the key to the upper floors. Once the player locates the room a punctuating cutscene of Loredo's mother plays, as the old woman prepares to test some of the drugs she has been concocting. She thinks Geralt is there to free "the elven girl" and says he's too late, before trying to surprise Geralt with an attack which he instinctively reacts to by killing her. As the player moves towards the rest of the house, it triggers another short cutscene of Loredo approaching Ves. These staccato alternations of quick gameplay and quick cutscenes in the middle of the quest drive the player ever forward, especially combined with the brief glimpses of an ally in trouble. The pauses are brief, and therefore do not offer much in the way of reflection here, but the way they break up the action and cut back and forth between Geralt and his ultimate goal is an effective way of building tempo that either action or cutscenes drawn out might not allow for.

From that cutscene, intensifying action sequences signal another shift both leading up to and following a key point of reflection that calls on the player's memory of other experiences in

the game. First, Geralt infiltrates the upper floors and faces more foes in a slightly longer section of a couple of minutes or more. Upon entering the tower, a brief cutscene plays with Ves warning Geralt before Loredo tries to ambush him. Loredo proves a more difficult foe than those of previous action sequences. Afterwards, Geralt frees Ves, who says she thinks a woman needs help behind the next door. There, a longer cutscene plays, introducing an elf named Moril, lying pregnant on the bed, who begs for them not to leave her there. She asks what month it is, revealing she has been kept here so long she has lost track of time. The conversation indicates Loredo has kidnapped her and raped her. The subject matter of this scene alone likely triggers an emotional reaction, drawing on a range of extra-textual values regarding such injustice and evil—values likely first triggered by Loredo’s threat to Ves in preceding short cutscenes, but given more space for reflection here. Moril herself directly references intra-textual values previously evoked in the temporal pattern of the game’s hubs.

The particular construction of this chain quest pattern serves to emphasize an emotional scene with Moril, but it also serves as an invitation to the player’s memory. Moril’s presence is a conscious call-back to scenes encountered under a different temporal pattern, the hub pattern, likely many hours prior in the player’s experience. Early in Chapter One, Geralt must go see an elf, Cedric, for advice about a particular monster that is blocking the town’s port. Temporally, that scene falls within the hub pattern of the game, experiencing a series of cutscene conversations with various characters in between moving through the fairly safe space of the town and possibly doing inventory or resource management tasks. As Geralt approaches, a cutscene begins of Cedric speaking with another elf, Seharim as both gaze solemnly from their watchtower out into the forest:

**Seharim:** It'll be nearly a year now.

**Cedric:** Moril would delight in a day like this, Seharim. Enjoy the memory of her; don't wallow in the longing.

**Seharim:** I try, I do. But I cannot believe all the bad blood this disappearance has bred.

**Cedric:** Don't let other Seide [elves] poison your memory of her. Hatred is but an outlet for helplessness.

**Seharim:** Thank you, Cedric. Va fail [farewell]!

The dialogue establishes the disappearance of an elven woman named Moril as a source of sorrow and anger in the elven community. In its direct context, the cutscene primarily serves to establish the character of Cedric, but it offers the tale of Moril as a window onto conflict in the community that begins as merely a sad tale but will be revisited with more import later. In addition to advice about the monster, Cedric will clarify the tale, saying that while Seharim believes Moril died in the forest, "some say she was too beautiful and dh'oine [humans] must have harmed her," and he believes that "the forest did not take her." Cedric says he allows Seharim to believe monsters killed Moril because there is nothing that can be done either way. This little vignette does convey a great potential tragedy but the player likely will not consider it for too long as it appears amongst a number of other conversation subjects and events. Much later, if Geralt wanders into a certain bookshop and speaks with Einar Gausel, a dwarven leader of the nonhuman community, he may hear more about Moril, triggering the memory once again and suggesting the tale might have more import. At the end of an exchange about Einar's controversial role as intermediary between human government and nonhumans, he explains, "it wasn't always this hard. Turned sour when several elven lasses disappeared. We lost our trust in the humans, and the Scoia'tael ceased trusting us." Asked if the women turned up, Einar sadly

replies, “No, I believe nekkers [burrowing monsters] killed them... I remember Moril of the white hands... She and her lover made a beautiful pair.” The game thus ties the memory of Moril to strained human/nonhuman relations by establishing that association at two points in hub patterns of the chapter, then through referential pacing structures the chain quest pattern to trigger those memories and drive home the emotional impact by emphasizing the scene in which Moril appears.

As with the first chain quest in Chapter One, this chain quest also follows the emphasized point of reflection with an interstitial period of intense action (and some very brief cutscenes) before returning to drive the value conflict home with a more personal connection to Geralt in the re-contextualizing cutscene. In this way, referential pacing is similar to emphatic pacing, but there is less distance between these points of reflection and less parallelism across the entirety of the pattern. Ves suggests they leave out the front, as the elf will not make it out the window in her state, and what follows is action in the sense of slow navigation, though the player can overhear Ves and Moril speaking, confirming that Moril was kidnapped the year prior. The navigation is interrupted when Moril’s water breaks, and in a brief cutscene Ves says they must go back to the tower to birth the baby and that Geralt needs to get help. Geralt must fight his way through another wave of guards entering the tower and then out to help finish the battle already underway outside in another extended period of action. Once the fighting is done, Geralt asks Roche where he’s been, and a flashback sequence of Roche’s fight with Iorveth plays.

Back in the present, to start the final re-contextualizing cutscene of the chapter, Roche laments Iorveth escaping, and one of his men remarks “bloody nonhumans.” Here, we see the strain of racism amongst Geralt’s ostensible allies rear its head yet again, calling back to the first chain quest of the chapter. That Roche ignores this comment entirely and simply goes on to ask

about the situation here, re-emphasizes the complicity with that unethical sentiment and value set and echoes his disregard for accusations of oppression in the prior quest. As Geralt is about to report Ves appears on the balcony with the newborn baby boy. Roche asks whose child it is and Geralt explains the kidnapping. To this, another of Roche's men spits and says, "I'd never touch a she-elf," which draws a hard backhand from Geralt. This act within the cutscene stands out for a number of reasons. Few cutscenes within the game feature Geralt taking any actions whatsoever beyond walking and speaking, and that alone marks the act as significant. Beyond that, in decisions that could support one side or another of a value conflict, often the player has the choice to select one or the other in a dialogue tree. In this case, however, the player receives no choice. Geralt's value systems may be shaped by the player's choices, but the character of Geralt has his own value systems that unfold to the player in cutscenes and moments like this. Geralt does not support such blatant racism even if he may ally with those that do for other reasons. By including this act without a choice, the game forces the player to hold onto the value conflict set up, to remain aware of it and not resolve it by embracing the wrongs done by his allies. These more unusual cutscenes where the Geralt takes actions and makes choices—essentially becomes a character in his own right rather than just the player's avatar—often occur at crucial moments of the plot. Beyond that, they call for reflection on players' own thoughts and actions in relation to those of the character they have come to identify with.<sup>11</sup>

Roche intervenes before a fight can break out and Ves's scream draws everyone to the tower as they discover Moril has killed herself. With the need to depart to continue their mission, Roche ponders what to do with the child "It's not coming with us, and who in this hellhole will

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that while Geralt usually functions as an instrument of the player's will within the world of the game, he is also a character with his own value set that might at times conflict with the values certain players might be drawn to.

take in a half-breed?” Geralt tells them to “take it to Seherim... and make sure to tell him it’s Moril’s child.” The closing cutscene of the chapter is Geralt looking over the bow of a ship and waving to a somber Seherim holding the child on the riverbank. What began as a minor side plot that the player may not identify as especially relevant through conversations in the game hub ultimately becomes the centerpiece for the closing of one of the game’s chapters. Of course, the significance lies in what that plot represents: tension and fear between the races, and also the conflict of values between Geralt and the forces he has chosen to align with. The game highlights conflicting values for the player to reflect upon in these final cutscenes through the particular referential pacing of events in this quest, but in this instance the values are no longer being merely constructed and refined—this example prompts a reflection on past points of reflection. Certainly, it calls on the player to form new associations and perspectives on values formed under the hub temporal pattern, yet it does the same with values formed and complicated in other chain quest patterns such as the second instance I discussed.

As this chapter has established, our experience of time and memory is key to our engagement with the world as ethical beings. My reading of cognitive memory research on the way we form, revisit, and revise memories suggests that effective ethical engagement depends on the precise placement of points of reflection. This case study demonstrates the importance of repetition and the pacing of action and reflection to a player’s formation of valuescapes within a game. At the basic level of game quests, the differences between the three examples reveal how the particular patterning of events can accomplish different tasks—from constructing and updating key values and associations in constructive pacing, to emphasizing through variance a reflection on value clashes in emphatic pacing, or even (as in referential pacing) orchestrating a reflection on previous points of reflection placed in a new context. Here, we see the theory of



action and pause developed in the previous chapter made concrete. Arguing that reflection and action work together in tandem was a necessary first step, but this chapter moved to demonstrate *how* they work together. The fact that such varying tasks and goals may be accomplished by altering the relationship between action and reflection proves the impact of these points of reflection to ethical engagement with conflicting valuescapes. Yet, understanding how the pacing of events in a game triggers the formation of values and the clashes between them in the player's mind is only part of the picture. We must also consider what elements or formal techniques of a game enable these values to be carried over and continually evoked over the longer course of a game. To this end, this chapter laid the foundation for understanding values as accumulating in association with particular characters over the broader course of the game, which I will explore in more detail in the next chapter.

#### **4 CHAPTER THREE: EVOKING VALUESCAPES THROUGH CHARACTERS**

I previously developed an argument for how valuescapes arise out of points of reflection as they are interspersed between segments of action. My analysis centered on the particular patterns of time and how the pacing of events (action sequences or cutscenes) could be used to build valuescapes and/or emphasize value conflicts. I demonstrated the importance of repetition and memory in constructing and reconstructing these valuescapes as the game prompts certain value associations with events (and sometimes characters) encountered a few hours previously in the game. Many mainstream RPGs, however, contain upwards of one hundred hours of content from start to finish, and I have stated the importance of considering valuescapes not only in small segments, but also over the entire course of a game. Within these lengthier games, valuescapes may require especially salient memory triggers in the form of characters or locations. In this

chapter, I shift my focus to how complex valuescapes may form around especially integral characters. In this way, conflicts may develop slowly over the course of the game even as the player's emotional engagement with the character also grows with repeated contact. In such cases, while the chain quest temporal pattern discussed previously still shapes points of reflection at key crisis moments, these valuescapes draw mostly upon points of reflection spread throughout the game during dialogue in game hubs or moments of pause between combat in the wilderness.

My emphasis on the longitudinal build-up of these valuescapes means that, while I wish to shift focus from actions to the pauses between them, active gameplay remains important to my theory. Moments of reflection derive their strength from being spread out and embedded within the action of gameplay, triggered again and again just as memories are triggered repeatedly within the flow of day-to-day life. One prominent technique for reiterating such moments and cueing valuescapes is through the use of non-player-characters (NPCs) that either follow alongside the player-character (PC) or show up at various points throughout the game. Many Bioware games, the studio's *Dragon Age* series in particular, devote considerable time to these interactions, which makes the latest game *Dragon Age: Inquisition* the perfect place to look for case studies.

At first glance each of the *Dragon Age* games is about the struggle of confronting and surviving a major world or regional crisis. The main quest arc of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (DA:I) tells the familiar tale of an ancient evil (Corypheus) who seeks to destabilize, destroy, and ultimately remake the world in his image. The PC leads a group of other heroic characters to stop Corypheus, thwarting his plans, weakening his forces, and ultimately destroying him. However, when playing in full the roughly 100 or more hours of quests and side-quests, another set of

themes emerges—for much of the time these games are more about confronting prejudice, and dealing with differing cultural values. That these themes stand out, despite being only tangentially relevant to most major quest lines, is indicative of how a whole world of values can be interwoven in a game, reiterated throughout the flow of gameplay and yet not entirely in service to gameplay goals.

The game's design offers many different types of NPC encounters. An NPC encounter in the game may provide a utility, quest-giver, or companion function though some NPCs take on more than one of these roles at different points. Certainly, some NPCs have no script for interaction and could be considered more akin to scenery in all aspects beyond the visual representation of personhood. The NPCs we tend to talk about and remember, however, generally have some scripted interaction with the player. Many of these NPCs provide a utility or resources to accomplishing goals within the game, ensuring they will be visited frequently (merchants, for example). Some offer quests, objectives, or narrative context to the world of the game. A few may be companions for the PC as they journey out into the game world, explore, and complete quests. These different roles can be mixed in a number of ways, such that NPC companions may also offer quests, while merchants or other utility NPCs may also be wrapped up in quests or giving context to the world beyond their role as an interface with the game's system of economy.

NPCs are a valuable tool for prompting moral reflection because they are integral to the entire course of gameplay, because we make assumptions about their internal states, and because they act as sounding boards for ethical decisions. As they are spread throughout the game, we also have a great deal of access and familiarity with NPCs. Finally, in a game like *DA:I*, there is such a large ensemble cast of NPCs that they can act as sounding boards for a variety of

conflicting ethical positions. In many cases, the entire ethical landscape the player processes is presented through the lens of these characters and how they play off of each other and the events occurring in the game.

For the purposes of this analysis, I will be discussing NPCs that may be considered the PC's allies and are involved either in initiating/concluding quests or in travelling the world and confronting its obstacles alongside the PC. The NPCs that do not accompany the PC out into world mainly serve to inform the PC of quests (gameplay goals as well as narrative goals) and of the larger state of game world. These are the advisor NPCs (Cullen, Leliana, and Josephine). They often function as quest-givers of a sort, with dialogue cutscenes bookending quests, introducing the context and goals beforehand and following up afterwards. In this role they alert the player to goals and (where applicable) inform the player of the specific consequences of how those goals were met before moving the quest arc along towards the game's conclusion.

The NPCs that travel alongside the PC as they go out into the world to explore and complete objectives are more impactful, being necessary for successfully navigating the game's challenges and, thus, ever present to the player. There are many of these NPCs to choose from (Varric, Cassandra, Solas, Vivienne, Sera, Blackwall, Iron Bull, Dorian, and Cole), but the player can and generally will travel with up to three of these NPC companions at any time. While a player of *DA:I* may choose to travel alone, the difficulty of gameplay generally prohibits this choice. Travelling alone, the typical PC will likely find themselves outmatched by the challenges and foes the game places along the way. Also, the spread of NPCs offers a variety of abilities (gameplay resources) that will not only be useful in combat with foes but sometimes necessary to getting past environmental obstacles. Furthermore, the game encourages the player to travel with companions (and to occasionally switch the companions chosen to go along if the player is prone

to staying with the same three) by requiring specific companions to be present to complete certain quests.

The usefulness of these companion NPCs and the encouragement of their presence by the systems of gameplay opens the way for them to become especially salient representations within the game world. The ongoing presence of these NPCs spread throughout the game, combined with their digital representations as persons of a sort, can easily lead a player to form emotional attachments to them, which could strengthen memories involving these characters and cause such memories to be rehearsed more frequently. *DA:I* further encourages this by giving the characters distinct personalities and dialogue responses to various locations and objects encountered in the game's world (even beyond major quests), as well as having them discuss, argue, and banter with each other depending on which characters have been selected for the party. These functions lay the groundwork for values to accrue around such characters. In *DA:I* especially, a large portion of the conflicting values the players might consider at any given point are formed through interactions with these NPCs who are constant companions. The valuescape considered with a companion NPC comprises a complex set of values of their total character, as opposed to values derived from specific moments or events as was the case with NPCs in *The Witcher 2*, who are only present in certain memorable quests.

#### 4.1 Case Study of The Iron Bull



*Figure 2 Iron Bull*

All the major ally NPCs in *DA:I*, companions and advisors, have certain crisis moments. These crisis moments always involve one or more scripted cutscenes with dialogue choices, and they often instigate or are found at the culmination of quests (generally operating like the chain quest temporal pattern described in the previous chapter). In a game like *DA:I*, manipulating the pacing of events at such crisis moments remains integral, but is only part of the story—much of the work establishing the value conflict occurs gradually over tens of hours of gameplay. The crisis moments are where many of the most poignant points of reflection involving NPCs will take place, where several values that have accrued around the NPC and perhaps values of other NPCs will come into conflict. One such crisis moment involves The Iron Bull (voiced by actor Freddie Prinze, Jr.). He is a member of a particular race/culture, the Qunari, and is operating as

mercenary captain that hires on with the PC. Exploring his crisis moment, and the values evoked by the many other moments necessary to the strength of its impact, will ultimately demonstrate how games may use NPCs to prompt moral reflection.

Iron Bull makes a particularly good case study because he is a double valued character, a character caught between two cultures: his Qunari homeland, a strictly controlled empire that values the greater good over individual freedom, and Orlais, the country he's been embedded as a spy (or Ben-Hassrath) in for many years. Orlais, like many fantasy cultures, loosely echoes historical Europe and of the two is most likely to resonate with the culture of this game's typical player. There is a monarchy in Orlais, and below that is a significant disparity between the wealthy class and the poor or subaltern groups, yet personal freedom (or the idea of it, at least) is central. In Iron Bull's cutscene dialogues, many players will find issues and values that resonate with values of their own culture, and others that may seem abhorrent.

Iron Bull's crisis quest ultimately involves a clash of values between two different cultures and two integral aspects of Bull's identity—the ingrained cultural values of his Qunari homeland and the new values he has found through the very real friendship and attachment he has to the men and women of his mercenary company. At the crisis, Iron Bull (and the player) will face the choice of whether to sacrifice Bull's men or to reject his culture and turn away from his identity and much of what he once believed. To fully understand the weight of that crisis and the range of values the player is prompted to reflect on, however, we have to account for how those values develop and unfold over the course of the game from the character's introduction up to the crisis moment itself.

Both aspects of Bull's identity (the communitarian, instrumentalist culture of his homeland and the individualistic humanism of his adopted culture) show themselves by the time

he is fully recruited as an NPC companion. However, the player's first impression of Iron Bull, initiating the quest to recruit him, comes not with an introduction to the NPC himself but rather his lieutenant, Krem, who he sends to make contact. This proves significant in that it establishes Bull's identity first, in the player's eyes at least, as mercenary captain loyal to his men, and that first impression may impact the choice at the crisis moment later on. Following the player's return from the first unlocked main story quest and a subsequent meeting with advisors, Krem appears in a central location, marked as important by an exclamation point on the map. When approached, a conversation is initiated where Krem introduces the company, offers information about potential foes, and invites the PC to meet Iron Bull and his mercenary company The Chargers. If pressed for information, Krem's description of Iron Bull, beyond his physical appearance "he's big and he's got horns," proudly announces that, "he leads from the front, he pays well, and he's a lot smarter than the last bastard I worked for. Best of all he's professional; he accepts contracts from the first to put up a real offer. You're the first time he's gone out of his way to pick a side."

This initial mapping of the values surrounding Iron Bull establishes some important characteristics. That Iron Bull made unprecedented effort to approach with the information signals usefulness to the PC (both in terms of story and potentially resources in meeting gameplay goals) and identifies him as a potential ally. More crucially, the circumstances and details of the conversation convey a sense of loyalty, unity, and respect between Iron Bull and his men from our first introduction to him. While Bull demonstrates a remarkable openness about his values throughout the game, Krem reveals almost as much about these values—whether through separate dialogue cutscenes or through the playful conversation they engage in



with each other—and meeting Krem before Iron Bull cues us into this relationship, which may further impact the crisis quest.

The first scene Iron Bull actually appears in establishes him as a good leader close to his men, a leader that does what needs to be done alongside them and celebrates with them afterwards. This echoes Krem's description of him, but adds for the player a more direct experience of Iron Bull's leading from the front and his duty to his men. This development is necessary, because the relationship between Bull and his men must be established early and built throughout if it is to be weighted equally against something as significant as Iron Bull's long-held cultural values in the crisis moment. When the player first goes to recruit Iron Bull, he is seen fighting mutual foes. Before any dialogue cutscene takes place, the player engages in combat alongside Iron Bull and his Chargers, letting the player experience in small part the camaraderie of this company through gameplay before pausing to more fully develop those values in a cutscene. In the cutscene, Bull's first lines are asking Krem about his men and any injuries they might have. In response to the news of no deaths, he boisterously responds, "That's what I like to hear! Let the throat cutters finish up and then break out the casks!" Bull greets the Inquisitor with equal exuberance, and in response to being asked if he's looking for work, "I am... not before my drink though." What follows is Iron Bull introducing Krem and some joking insults exchanged between the two before Bull gets down to the business of offering to join the PC. The scene serves to reinforce the values of loyalty and respect amongst Bull and his Chargers previously established, as well as adding a hint of more light-hearted camaraderie. This is a character that works hard and plays hard. Beyond these character qualities, the encounter also demonstrates the alternation between action and reflection—the fight before the cutscene not only sets this moment of reflection apart from any previous moments, but in this particular

case also enacts the characters as a force working together before the player reflects upon this fact.

Iron Bull's introductory scene also explicitly reveals the other side of his dual nature, setting the player up to watch the development of both as they go from separate and equally important character traits to the crisis when he must choose between them. Bull's frank admission upfront that he is a Qunari spy (Ben-Hassrath) and would be willing to share information from their spy network is a bit nebulous as to what gameplay impact it would have, but a player might suppose it holds some impact. This portion of the scene proves crucial, though, to complicating the valuescape that forms around Iron Bull from the beginning. The scene hints at a different set of loyalties here—loyalties to homeland and culture, along with organizations and duties of his homeland. The revelation is tempered at this point by the demonstration of honesty and the service seemingly in the PC's best interest, yet this introductory scene still contains the seeds for the complex valuescape of Iron Bull and for the key crisis of values surrounding him.

At several points throughout the game, in between quests and periods of exploration, the player may engage in numerous cutscene dialogues that will further expand Iron Bull's values, strengthening the player's memory of those values through repetition while at the same time developing them towards their ultimate conflict. These dialogues take place within the more freeform temporal pattern of game hubs, so the precise order of these cutscenes, and possibly how deep the player delves into them, will vary from player to player. They may not serve as the most poignant and striking points of reflection, taking place amongst numerous other points of reflection as the player will likely move through the hub talking to other characters before and after Iron Bull. Regardless, these cutscene dialogues play an important role laying the foundation

and prompting reflection on both aspects of Bull's identity—on the one hand the relationship with his men, the PC, and the persona he has taken on in his role as mercenary captain, and on the other hand the Ben-Hassrath spy devoted to his homeland and to the Qun. Interspersed as they are within the broader flow of gameplay, the large amount of information conveyed in these scenes is not given over all at once, but in small chunks with diversions in between, such that the values are triggered again and again to become salient themes in the player's mind—revisited as emotionally charged episodic memories.

Iron Bull's values as loyal mercenary captain are most fully developed in the eyes of his lieutenant Krem, who as an NPC becomes a sort of stand-in or figurehead not just for the Chargers as a whole, but for the relationship between Bull and his Chargers. Understanding how this relationship differs from the relationship between most leaders and their soldiers is key to the sharp divide experienced during the crisis conflict. Krem's response to the question of what kind of commander Bull is in one of the early cutscenes offers the best summary:

If you know what you're doing and hold up your end, he's easy. He doesn't accept anything less. He keeps us alive, he leads from the front, and if you've an idea that will win the fight he listens. I've seen bands whose captains had to prove they were swinging the biggest sword. Bull isn't like that. The Chargers might give him more lip than you'd expect but every one of us would lay down our lives for the big ass.

Bull's Chargers are an effective, professional fighting force, and to that end he expects a lot from them as their leader. Yet, this dialogue also reveals Bull as a leader who respects his men beyond their usefulness as a tool to execute his plans, a leader who strives to keep them safe and is willing to accept them as individuals with valid ideas and contributions. In return, Krem indicates, the relationship resembles friendship more than it does rigid hierarchy, and the men reward that relationship with unwavering loyalty when it counts. Contrasted with what the player

will come to know about the more rigid Qunari culture, this differing set of values around leadership and service will inform the discord in Bull's values at the crisis moment.

Krem's personal history with Iron Bull reveals another reason for this loyalty, and also unveils Bull as someone willing to make sacrifices for others with no gain or return in mind.

Krem relates the tale of how they met, being saved while fleeing Tevinter (the culture of one of the prominent foes in the game) with the sacrifice of Bull's eye:

The guards had me on the tavern floor when Bull came inside and yelled for them to stop. One of them saw trouble coming and figured he'd finish me off. The guard had a flail. Bull put himself between me and the blow. Big horned idiot, didn't even know me.

Sacrificing one's personal safety for a stranger is a value few people exemplify, but many uphold as ideal. This highly regarded value ties directly in to the close relationship between Bull and his lieutenant, Krem. Bull's appearance is striking for two reasons: his horns, which signify his Qunari culture, and his eye patch, which thanks to this dialogue will come to signify someone who cares for individuals and friendships beyond that culture.

Other cutscenes prove more relevant to Iron Bull's value of duty to his culture and faith. There are numerous instances where he discusses his beliefs, how the world is viewed in his culture, and his fears of losing that culture and faith. These dialogues are necessary for the player to understand what they would be asking Bull to give up if they wanted him to choose his men over his culture at the crisis moment. They are important for establishing the depths of his convictions such that the player sees a real conflict there, and how the player comes to reflect on these scenes will likely impact the choice made. The Qunari culture aspect of Iron Bull's nature is revealed interspersed with Bull's devotion to his men as the game progresses. The process is nearly symmetrical, as the two sets of values build towards their ultimate conflict.

In one dialogue, Iron Bull reveals more details about the Ben-Hassrath, providing some insight to the part of Qunari culture he is most directly involved with and the rigid division of societal control involved. Bull explains:

Ben-Hassrath is actually a general term. You've got the secret police who investigate problems inside our territory, you've got the re-educators who take care of the problems and *fix* their minds, or make them disappear, and then you've got the spies.

Bull is, of course, a spy, and in dialogue reveals how he serves by passing information to his Qunari contacts while operating in the guise of Iron Bull the mercenary captain. Bull's allegiance to the Qunari does not merely stem from being raised there—he served and still actively serves its interests. This elevates the cultural friction even beyond that of an expatriate in a foreign land—it is not a case of the persistence of old traditions from a land left behind, but rather a very concrete part of his everyday life.

The cutscene dialogues do more than provide encyclopedic information about Qunari culture and values. They also add a personal touch unveiling how deeply that culture's values sit with Iron Bull, which will further contribute to the weight of the crisis conflict. In another dialogue, Bull tells the tale of how he became a spy. First sent as a soldier to restore order to an island of contentious territory between the Qunari, Tevinter, and local rebels, he relates the horrors of war and the losses experienced, stating, "One day I woke up and couldn't think of a damn reason to keep doing my job, so I turned myself in to the re-educators... I wanted them to fix me." This line of conversation provides a deeper view of how integral Iron Bull's culture is to him, and his role within that culture. This is a culture that values order, but where free thought is outlawed, sometimes controlled by force. Someone like Iron Bull who is enmeshed in this culture might willingly turn himself in to have his mind altered. Dialogue reveals that those Qunari that reject their culture and the law of the Qun become Tal-Vashoth, and most of those

become savage bandits that must be put down for the safety of everyone. Iron Bull, in his past was in charge of stopping those savages and saw what they became. To Bull, then, losing the Qun is more than parting ways with a culture; it is to lose one's mind entirely to one's baser nature. This revelation makes it more understandable why Iron Bull defends his society's thought control, and would even go so far as to submit to it himself as an alternative.

In some early dialogues of cultural summary, we get the first hints of potential value conflicts—both within the game in the contrast between fictional cultures, and potentially with the player's own values outside the game. To one question about government and dissent under Qunari culture, Iron Bull responds:

People disagree, yeah, but the priests are there to solve disagreements. Here in Orlais, politicking comes from people putting their own gain ahead of the gains of society. If you do that among the Qunari, the Ben-Hassrath set you straight. Or kill you.

When phrased this way, Iron Bull evokes some of the value conflicts likely at issue in the player's own culture: corrupt politicians making decisions for their own gain. Yet, the alternatives offered by Qunari culture are an affront to values of personal liberty, especially in light of Iron Bull's descriptions of re-education carried out by some of Iron Bull's fellow Ben-Hassrath (secret police and spies). "The weak minds get bent into the right shape," Iron Bull explains in another cutscene, "Strong minds like yours, they'd have given you a poison... You'd have been a polite happy laborer for the rest of your life, and you'd have had a handler to help you and make sure you didn't crap your pants." The Qunari have a solution to some of society's most potent value conflicts, but that solution is the near-complete dissolution of free will. Comparing this willingness to sacrifice individuals for societal goals with the more freeform, respectful way Bull treats individuals under his control, the roots of Bull's discord become clear.

As a dual-natured character, Iron Bull seems aware of the problematic value structure he presents, and attempts to justify and reconcile it. In one train of dialogue, he argues that for most people their daily lives wouldn't change significantly, comparing a baker in his homeland to a baker in the Orlesian capital of Val Royeaux. If the player elects to comment that the Qunari "baker isn't free," Iron Bull retorts, "How many personal freedoms do you think that baker in Val Royeaux has? Life isn't about freedom." In these dialogues, we see Iron Bull's justification and negotiation of his homeland's cultural values set against those of the other prominent culture in the game. The dialogue engages the player with such value conflicts as the needs of society versus the needs of the individual, and the nature of freedom for all even in a supposedly free society. At this point in the game, this dialogue only serves to map out these potential conflicts. They may not be brought to a poignant point of moral reflection for the player, but the foundations of such big moments are being laid in these early moments of reflection. Iron Bull is torn between an individualistic culture in many ways like our own, and a culture where thought is strictly controlled for the good of society and all actions are driven by duty.

Those sets of values accrue gradually around the character of Iron Bull over the course of the game. These particular expressions of duty to homeland and friendship, and the numerous values wrapped up in them (faith, loyalty, etc.) occur alongside each other, peacefully coexisting for the most part with just the slight foreshadowing of conflict until Iron Bull's crisis moment. We see this in the way the two sides are both presented in Iron Bull's introductory scene as discussed above. It also shows in the dialogue and interactions throughout the first half of the game. Krem offers a window onto it in one dialogue when asked, "Is him being Qunari odd?" replying:

He hasn't tried to convert us to the Qun if that's what you're asking. Bull's Chargers don't care who you light a candle for so long as your shield stays up.

If he hadn't told me he was Ben-Hassrath I'd have thought he left that life behind.

Bull's Qunari values, to Krem's mind, are not a particularly troublesome or obtrusive part of his personality. That part of his nature does not seem to adversely affect their relationship, nor the camaraderie of the group, as Krem explains that many other members of the group know about Bull being Ben-Hassrath (secret police) as well:

Not the whole band, but those who've been around long enough to trust. He figures most of us would find out sooner or later, but it should come from him. Eyes to eye, he says. He's never messed up a job. He just writes letters back home. Lots of the boys write letters back home.

While one might argue Iron Bull's devotion to his homeland is more problematic than that devotion expressed by the other Chargers, given how opposed Qunari culture is to every other, the Chargers clearly do not see it that way. The two sides of Bull's nature are allowed to sit alongside each other despite the seeds of potential conflict already being there.

The complexity of Iron Bull's camaraderie with his men developing alongside the player's understanding of his Qunari nature shows itself most clearly in a lengthy special cutscene triggered in the middle of Bull's character arc. This is one of several cutscenes in the game which, while starting from the typical action of clicking the interact button on the NPC at the Inquisition's main base, soon leads to a separate cutscene that lacks the freeform camera movement or easy option to withdraw that other cutscene dialogues have. This change of pace and interface sets this cutscene apart from most other cutscenes and marks it as a special scene the player is prompted to process and reflect upon. Once the player elects to accept the invitation, the camera cuts to the PC entering a separate area. Iron Bull and Krem can immediately be seen seated and relaxed, drinking in the frame. "Ah, good," Iron Bull exclaims, "we're not drinking alone!" A closeup of Bull's face cuts to a medium wide shot of the whole company, lounging



casually in chairs or on the floor in the room. “How you doing Crème de la Krem?” Bull asks as the next shot centers on Krem and another unidentified Charger. “Your worship! I’m so glad you have someone new to hit with that joke.” Krem retorts. At this point, the player is given some option as to how the PC should respond, in a manner similar to the usual dialogue cutscene. If the PC mentions there are worse places someone might go with that nickname, Krem responds “So can the chief, believe me, he loves his nicknames.” There is a close-up of Iron Bull as he explains, “Hey, when I was growing up my name was just this series of numbers. We all give each other nicknames under the Qun.” Krem lightheartedly pokes more fun with the comment “Do they ever wear shirts under the Qun, chief? Or do they just go around binding their breasts like that?” A bit forcefully Iron Bull replies, “It’s a harness, Krem,” the camera closing in on his face once more. “Yes, for your pillowy man-bosoms,” a smiling Krem replies, the camera centered on Krem over Iron Bull’s shoulder, revealing another bemused member of the Chargers looking on. “Let me know if you need help binding, you can really chisel something out of that overstuffed look,” Krem adds, with a close-up from the camera as the player is given the option to either move on, or have the PC inquire about Krem’s gender with varying degrees of certainty (e.g. “Are you a woman?”, “When did you know?”, “Why pass as a man?”). This opening serves the purpose of further evoking the kind of playful irreverence one might associate with strong friendship, while transitioning into an opportunity to see Krem’s character and values.

More importantly, the scene offers the player the opportunity to see an instance where Iron Bull’s Qunari values may actually contribute to one of his friendships outside of the Qun. This complicates the valuescape, demonstrating that these values are not always in opposition. If the player elects to bring up Krem’s gender, an interesting line of discussion arises, further distinguishing Krem’s personal story. The PC says “I didn’t realize...” Krem replies, “You

didn't? Well great, now we can all talk about it." Iron Bull interjects, "in Qunadar Krem would be a Qunathlak, that's what we call someone born one gender but living like another." With the camera cutting back and forth between closeups of the two, Krem adds "And Qunari don't treat those... Qun people any different than a real man." Iron Bull states resolutely, "they are real men, just like you are." There is a touching pause and a close-up of Krem smiling, "your people aren't so bad after all." With a wide grin, Iron Bull replies, "don't get your hopes up, Krem, we still come down hard on the backtalk." The exchange reveals the values of Iron Bull's culture as the root of his lack of prejudice towards Krem, perhaps complicating how the player views those values and adding a more positive association to the Qun (depending on the player's own values with regard to this issue). In many ways, the combination of Bull's two cultural identities leads him to be more accepting than either would alone.

While Krem does largely stand in for the Chargers as a whole, this scene also establishes more of the Chargers as characters in their own right and, through some playful conversation, shows key qualities of each and Iron Bull's affection and connection to them. The cutscene gives the Chargers a personal touch that the player will likely recall at the crisis moment, making the decision to send them to their deaths not entirely one of condemning faceless soldiers. The relationships seem, at this point, untouched by Bull's devotion to the Qun. With a jovial laugh Bull changes the subject, introducing the other Chargers, "Anyway, here's the rest of the Chargers. Or what's left of the rest. A lot of them went looking for stronger drinks. We've got Rocky and Skinner there, and over there is Stitches, Dalish [laughs], and Grim. Crazy bunch of assholes, but they're mine." Despite the crudeness of language, the tone of Bull's voice mirrors the look of pride on his face as the camera settles in to a close-up and offers the player another chance to select the PC's input. The player may choose to inquire about any of the other

Chargers present, though they get less extended conversation than Krem here and elsewhere (Krem is the only Charger the PC may speak to one to one at any time). The responses follow the same back and forth pattern with the player addressing an NPC, the NPC responding verbally or nonverbally, and Iron Bull making a boast and sometimes a joking insult. This pattern serves to connect the player to the character and the character to Iron Bull, inserting the player (albeit briefly) into these relationships. It is perhaps not as effective as it would be given a few more interactions, but it does the work of establishing how much Bull knows about and cares for his men.<sup>12</sup> The exchange ends with everyone drinking and singing their company song, clinking mugs and smiling at one another. While the rest of the Chargers are not given as much characterization as Krem, the scene importantly establishes some connection and sense of familiarity and friendship between Iron Bull and each Charger in turn. In addition, exposing the player to even a slight introduction to the Chargers as people at this stage lays the groundwork for a more poignant moment during Bull's crisis than would otherwise occur. At this point these relationships sit beside and out of conflict with Bull's duty to the Qunari, and it is important to see this moment before the conflict arises.

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<sup>12</sup> Select dialogue options reveal background, such as that Bull took Skinner in after she took revenge for some human nobles killing elves, and that he jokes with his mage, Dalish, who pretends not to be a mage. That Bull associates with free mages is also noteworthy, as in Qunari culture mages are kept shackled and used as tools with even less freedom than other Qunari.

<u>Qunari/Bull's Tradition</u>	<u>Non-Qunari/Chargers</u>
+ Communitarian	+ Individualist
+ Instrumentalist	+ Humanist
+ Controlling of thoughts and actions	+ Prone to corruption/income disparity
+ Duty	+ Friendship/Camaraderie
+ Cultural Identity	+ Loyalty, Responsibility

*Figure 3 The Values of Iron Bull's Two Cultures*

Through both gameplay and more distinctive cutscenes, the player also gets a view of Bull's other individual personality traits, his humor and exuberance for life and the more benign elements of his culture. One such special cutscene (after the PC and Iron Bull kill a dragon) sees the Bull encouraging the PC to get drunk with him while he celebrates and recounts the special reverence Qunari hold for dragons and the honor gained for killing one. It displays a camaraderie of shared battle similar to that held between Bull and his Chargers. In between dialogue cutscenes, the player may become accustomed to having Iron Bull around, to his usefulness in combat, and to his occasional commentary on the world as the player explores it. This can range from short remarks such as "This can't be good" to more rare and endearing puns and jokes he makes at certain locations such as him saying "So, owl you doing?" near an owl statue or "Anyone need a hand?" near a giant stone hand. The accumulated interactions over the whole course of gameplay give the player a sense of Bull's personality beyond his Qunari values. While this may not relate to the crisis conflict directly, it does impact whether we as players care about the character and, consequently, whether we care about the values or feelings represented in the character.

Across these broader segments of gameplay, the alternation between action and reflection remains important, and Iron Bull's contribution to gameplay itself should not be overlooked. In between all the cutscene dialogues that take place in game hubs lie hours of gameplay experiencing the flow of exploration and combat in the game's wilderness areas. Iron Bull's witty remarks just discussed themselves take place in the brief lulls following action in the game. Certainly, the character of Iron Bull invites emotional investment, but he is also a resource for the player, and the two are not unrelated. Iron Bull has use value to the player as a competent fighter and a necessary inclusion for certain quests, but this usefulness can also enhance our emotional engagement with a character. Recall Nussbaum's (2001b) discussion of the intentionality of emotions and the "salience or importance" of the object of emotions (p. 23). For Nussbaum, the perceived role an object of emotion plays in a person's life proves key to the impact of that emotion (p. 31). Thus considered, Iron Bull's frequent presence and usefulness to gameplay would certainly enhance the players emotions alongside the complex valuescape built up over numerous points of reflection.

All interactions with Iron Bull throughout the game, from those that will be integrally linked to and/or referenced in the crisis quest to those that merely give a sense of personality, are important to the player's construction and engagement with Bull's character. The fact that these interactions are spread over a long period of time, rather than merely developed in a couple of hours, expands the likelihood that the values associated with Bull will be rehearsed and strengthened in the player's memory. Indeed, an NPC such as Iron Bull serves as an excellent example of how the associations built up in episodic memory discussed in the previous chapter function over a longer time span, with even more opportunities for revisions and building new associations than a few chain quests occurring a few hours apart are able to accomplish. The

game gives the player time to process these memories and spaced as they are several hours apart, each appearance would involve reactivating the memory trace for Iron Bull and the values associated with him. In all likelihood, outside of the game itself the player experiences many aspects of her own daily life before coming back to the game.<sup>13</sup> Yet, even outside the game she might rehearse memories of an engaging character such as Iron Bull and the values attached to him. At the same time, of particular interest in *DA:I*, there are several other characters each with their own valuescapes and sometimes those valuescapes can clash with each other.

## 4.2 Other NPC Allies and Banter Dialogue

Several other NPC companions inhabit the game besides Iron Bull. As each NPC gathers their own valuescape—their own complex set of values conveyed in much the same way Iron Bull’s values are—these valuescapes will often be at odds, influencing the player’s moral reflection as she considers the differing responses to certain issues. While the two sides of Iron Bull’s nature (communitarian instrumentalism vs individualistic humanism) develop separately, some sense of growing conflict is still there—fed especially by these interactions with other NPC companions. With a few cutscenes as exceptions, the game evokes the value conflicts between different NPCs companions mainly through banter dialogue, lengthy overheard dialogue scripted to occur if two or more specific NPCs are with the PC while exploring the game world. These banter dialogues always occur in the lull between combat sequences, especially when such lulls occur near spatial points of interest. These scripted conversations don’t always happen at a set place in the game world or even after certain events, so they can be unpredictable, but if the player goes long enough with the same NPCs in the party then all possible dialogues for those

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<sup>13</sup> It would not be uncommon for a player to spend almost a year or more playing through the entirety of a game such as *DA:I*.

NPCs will eventually occur. They serve a dual purpose as both the primary vehicle for the clashing valuescapes of different characters and as a way to trigger reflection on these values even in the midst of the generally more action-heavy segments of the game's wilderness.

In terms of values, the character of Solas serves as a good foil for Iron Bull. An elven mage that has never been tied to society, Solas has values of individual freedom and will that are counter to most values of Iron Bull's culture of order with strictly controlled thought and magic as expressed above. This conflict unfolds over several banter dialogues that are likely to be separated by hours of gameplay. The first such banter dialogue touches on some of the previous values espoused in early cutscene dialogue between the PC and Iron Bull, but may complicate the player's reflection on those values by bringing them into conflict with those of Solas:

**Solas:** Iron Bull, I understand that among your people, you are... what is the term?

**Iron Bull:** Ben-Hassrath. Secret police. Spies, basically.

**Solas:** You spied upon your own people.

**Iron Bull:** Is that so different from Orlais or Ferelden? They have all kinds of people policing them.

**Solas:** What they say and do, yes. Not what they think.

**Iron Bull:** What you think is what you say and do.

**Solas:** No. Even the lowliest peasant may find freedom in the safety of her thoughts. You take even that.

Here, Iron Bull repeats his reasoning that the control his culture exerts does no harm because for the common peasant it would make little difference. Against this Solas offers up the value of free thought, regardless of whether that thought is acted upon. This may, depending on player dialogue choices, be similar to some dialogue cutscenes between the PC and Iron Bull. However, as banter dialogue between two companion characters it serves another function. Solas is a character with his own set of values accruing around him. Unlike Krem and the Chargers, his

dialogue and values do not always relate to the characterization of Iron Bull. Also unlike Krem and the Chargers, the player has the opportunity for just as much, if not more, interaction with Solas. This allows the game to build up these two distinct valuescapes and present an ongoing conflict leading up to and past Bull's crisis moment, sounding boards reflecting different positions, separate from the development of Iron Bull's internal struggle with his identity.

In a later segment of banter dialogue, Solas attempts to have Iron Bull choose between the values of the culture Bull surrounds himself with and the values of the Qunari culture of his homeland:

**Solas:** Surely even you see, Iron Bull, that freedom is preferable to mindless obedience to the Qun.

**Iron Bull:** How so? Last I checked, our mages weren't burning down Par Vollen.

**Solas:** You think Orlais and Ferelden would be better off under Qunari rule?

**Iron Bull:** Not really my call. I think most people everywhere have a system that works for 'em.

**Iron Bull:** When that breaks, you fix it. Like we're doing now.

**Solas:** Do not equivocate. Would we or would we not be better under the Qun?

**Iron Bull:** It's not that simple, Solas.

**Solas:** It absolutely is.

This conflict of cultures is the root difference between Solas and Iron Bull during their interactions, and it also lays the groundwork for the choice that must later be made during Iron Bull's crisis moment. The values of freedom or control evoked here, it should also be noted, do not occur in a vacuum of the game world. These points of reflection may also cause players to consider their own thoughts that have likely formed around such concepts as freedom or totalitarian governments.



Over the course of gameplay this particular line of banter dialogue reveals the depth of conflict in Iron Bull, and his fears of what would happen should his two cultures meet, in a manner not explored in one-on-one cutscene dialogues. The fact that Solas ultimately solicits Bull's confession of these fears demonstrates the importance of NPCs as sounding boards for conflicting valuescapes by forcing the player to reflect on the ever-developing arguments of both sides.

The moment comes when Bull finally responds to Solas's previous attempt to make him choose:

**Iron Bull:** Alright, Solas, been thinking. You wanna know how this place would be if the Qunari took charge?

**Iron Bull:** Orlais, Ferelden, all of it would be healthier under the Qun.

**Iron Bull:** But the war to make that happen? That'd be ugly. A lot of good people would die.

**Iron Bull:** So I'm not hoping it happens. There! You happy?

**Solas:** Happy? No. Quite the opposite.

**Iron Bull:** Oh, come on. I said I didn't want us to invade you!

**Solas:** No. You said this world would be brighter if all thinking individuals were stripped of individuality.

**Solas:** You only lack the will to get more blood on your hands.

In particular, Bull demonstrates a firm loyalty to his values but hesitance in killing "good people" to bring those values about. Taken in conjunction with cutscene dialogues noted above, one might connect this with Bull's loyalty to his mercenary company and the camaraderie he feels for them and for his new companions. Bull's devotion to his Qunari identity supports the ends, his devotion to the people around him doesn't allow him to justify the means, and this directly connects to the crisis conflict and many of the values surrounding the player's choice there.

It would be tempting to see the game as favoring Solas in these exchanges. The game, after all, springs from a culture that values freedom and individuality. While a simple reading could pose the conflict as whether Iron Bull will choose the “right” way in the end, for the game’s valuescapes to prompt truly poignant points of reflection the differing values need to be compelling. The last of this line of banter dialogue offers the most complex and compelling case for each NPC’s values:

**Iron Bull:** Tell me something, Solas. Do you think the servants here are happier than the people living under the Qun in Par Vollen?

**Solas:** It doesn't matter if they are happy, it matters that they may choose!

**Iron Bull:** Choose? Choose what? Whether to do their work or get tossed onto the street to starve?

**Solas:** Yes! If a Ferelden servant decides that his life goal is to... become a poet, he can follow that dream!

**Solas:** It may be difficult, and he might fail. But the whole of society is not aligned to oppose him!

**Iron Bull:** Sure, and good for him. How many servants actually go do that, though?

**Solas:** Almost none! What does that matter?

**Solas:** Your Qun would crush the brilliant few for the mediocre many!

**Iron Bull:** And then people feel like crap for failing.

**Iron Bull:** When the truth is, the deck was stacked against them anyway.

Here we see the drive in Iron Bull’s cultural values for order and happiness, at the sacrifice of choice. The lines of dialogue, not merely for the meaning of the words but also the emotion of vocal inflection, convey a genuine concern for the well-being of society from both parties. Iron Bull’s values come across to the player as deeply ingrained, with reasoning and thought behind them.

The interplay of Iron Bull and Solas hones their respective valuescapes against each other, and also prompts the player more strongly to reflect on the differences in values to be considered. Were these conflicts set solely between a character such as Iron Bull and an NPC that only appeared in the game once or twice, one might expect less tension. It's more likely the player would have an attachment to Iron Bull, given the amount of time the player has to interact with him. With another companion NPC like Solas, the player has had equal opportunity to form attachments. While a given player may feel more of an attachment to one or the other of these two NPCs, the investment in both is greater than with any other kind of NPC (e.g. advisors, merchants, enemies). The more often a player chooses to have these two NPCs in the party, the more likely she is to be invested in them, and the more likely they are to engage in banter dialogues as discussed above that might prompt the player to reflect on the positions of these NPCs. Iron Bull and Solas are, of course, only examples drawn from many possible interactions. Most of the more crucial points of moral reflection will involve considering the value positions of a number of different NPC allies, to varying degrees, though the interactions between Solas and Bull are the most important to this particular case study. As I have previously argued, the player is constantly constructing valuescapes at points of reflection throughout the game, and companion NPCs are key figureheads for these valuescapes to form around. The progression of arguments between Solas and Iron Bull discussed above demonstrates how clashes between different valuescapes can prove just as integral to poignant moral reflection as internal conflicts within a valuescape.

### **4.3 Iron Bull's Crisis Quest**

The competing fields of values built up around Iron Bull and through his interactions with other characters are developed in such a way that they have time to solidify in the player's

mind as separate yet integral parts of Bull's identity before they come into direct conflict. In his crisis, Bull faces a situation where he must sacrifice his men, friends he has been with for years, to fulfill a duty to his homeland, culture, and personal faith. This takes place during a special quest, Demands of the Qun, that requires Iron Bull's presence and is bounded and interwoven with numerous cutscenes that convey the conflict largely in the style of the chain quest pattern discussed in the previous chapter. In this case my primary focus will not be on the detailed pacing of time between events, but rather on how this crisis quest operates as the culmination of a value conflict built up over 50+ hours of gameplay.

This crisis quest presents its own series of moments of reflection culminating in a moral choice, but it does not do all the work on its own. Drawing on previous relationships and values developed to this point, the preliminary scene in Skyhold's courtyard sets up the importance of the task and what is at stake, but also signals the impending clash of values as the culture of Bull's friends and companions will finally meet the culture of his homeland directly. The quest opens on a cutscene of Bull and his top lieutenant, Krem, sparring and trading playful insults such as Iron Bull exclaiming, "Come on Krem, I'm working my ass off trying to get you to see that move," to which Krem retorts, "You've still got plenty of ass left, chief!" For most of the cutscene dialogue this initiates, Iron Bull and Krem are trading and interjecting verbal jabs at each other. Iron Bull presents an offer to join forces from his Qunari contacts, an alliance against mutual enemies, but want to run an operation together before committing. They want a small force, including the PC's party of characters and Iron Bull's Chargers. Iron Bull presents a range of advantages from the alliance, including some the player might expect to translate into gameplay advantages such as extra forces and intelligence to act on. Towards the end of the

dialogue, after Krem has left, Iron Bull finally expresses his misgivings now that the meeting of the two cultures he is a part of has become a reality:

**PC option:** You don't seem entirely happy about this.

**Iron Bull:** No, I'm good. It's uh... I'm used to them being over there. It's been awhile.

**PC option:** I thought Qunari wanted to extend their reach to the whole world.

**Iron Bull:** Yeah, just didn't think I'd see it. Look, the Qun answers a lot of questions. It's a good life for a lot of people. But it's a big change, and a lot of folks here wouldn't do so well under that kind of life. I guess it's not like we're converting. This is just us joining forces against Corypheus. On that front, I think we're good.

Here we see a bit of camaraderie between Iron Bull and Krem, calling up memories of similar previous encounters and contrasting those with the tension surrounding this decision to end the comfortable separation of the two aspects of Bull's life. The tension is evoked not merely in the words used, but also in the tone of voice, and in the frustration that shows through the violence with which Iron Bull spars at the beginning. With his Qunari contacts suddenly coming closer and making their presence known, Iron Bull seems far more uneasy than proud or defensive of his culture.

The following cutscene for this quest confronts Iron Bull with his culture, with the Qunari (and their values) represented by Gatt, someone from Iron Bull's past. In addition to establishing gameplay goals for the quest, this cutscene uses Gatt as an embodiment of Iron Bull's past as enforcer of the strict values of his homeland and current role as spy, just as the character of Krem serves as a symbol for Bull's friendship and new life with the Chargers. There is a friendly greeting and catching up, followed by introductions which reveal a rising discomfort toward the end:

**Iron Bull:** Boss, this is Gatt. We worked together in Seheron.

**Gatt:** It's a pleasure to meet you Inquisitor. Hissrad's reports say you're doing good work.

**PC option:** Iron Bull's name is Hissrad?

**Gatt:** Under the Qun, we use titles, not names.

**Iron Bull:** My title was Hissrad because I was assigned to secret work. You can translate it as "Keeper of Illusions" or...

**Gatt:** "Liar." It means liar.

**Iron Bull:** [with a scowl and angry tone] Well you don't have to say it like that!

The conversation quickly moves from familiarity to tension. Iron Bull's discomfort with Gatt, and with his Qunari title of liar, signals a discomfort or delusion he has about his own Qunari identity, that he might not wholly be that person anymore. The introduction of Gatt as an NPC here allows Bull to express a conflict with himself without explicitly stating such, one of the many ways NPCs can be a tool for engaging the player's moral reflection.

The game immediately contrasts the tension of Bull's cutscene with a representative of the communitarian, instrumentalist Qunari culture with a scene involving Bull's Chargers, who stand in for his role as friend and leader, as well as his attachment and respect for the individualistic culture that forms the root of his self-doubt. Stepping away from Gatt, Iron Bull voices his opinion of the mission, then points out the risk to either the men on the ground or the ship helping them. As the next portion of the quest moves towards a last interaction with Iron Bull's men before the mission, this dialogue foreshadows the choice that must be made. When the player and Iron Bull arrive to brief the Chargers, Bull's almost parental concern in the dialogue with his men heightens the tension, yet each admonition is interspersed with playful quips from Krem that plays off the men and their history together. An inflection of worry creeps

into Bull's voice at the end of the exchange as he says, "Just... pay attention, all right? The Vints want this red lyrium shipment bad," to which Krem replies, "Yes, I know. Thanks, mother." It is the first time the player sees Iron Bull and his men preparing for a battle, and the concern he shows evokes friendship, but also something deeper—a sense of responsibility. Ultimately, his sense of responsibility and friendship with these individuals is at odds with and perhaps overshadows their function to his Qunari culture as tools in service to an ideal.

To my larger argument, this scene also further demonstrates the importance of taking into account values developed in previous scenes over the course of the game. The relationships depicted between Iron Bull, Krem, and the Chargers have a weight to them here that they would not have were the crisis quest considered alone. Krem's playful quips in the scene where Iron Bull briefs the Chargers on their mission directly references the previous cutscene of their introduction, with dialogue such as Krem saying "It's all right. We've got a mage of our own," and Dalish loudly protesting, "I'm not a mage!" Occurring in this moment of reflection, such references prompt the player to consider the valuescape that has accumulated, preparing the player and making the crisis moment a more difficult decision. The player's choice, as well as the moral reflection leading up to and following that choice, is imbued with a deeper level of moral and emotional engagement due to the buildup of valuescapes over the course of the game.

The spacing of cutscenes in this crisis quest echoes the chain quests I analyzed in *The Witcher* in the way that moments of reflection work in tandem with gameplay, as we reflect and attend to them in part because of how they stand out from the flow of gameplay. The short action of navigating breaks up the first cutscene with Gatt from the second scene with Bull addressing his Chargers, and this interspersing of action seems quite intentional (the two cutscenes could have easily been merged). Somewhat typical exploration and fighting activity follows these two

lengthy cutscenes. The player navigates towards quest markers on the mini-map and faces off against groups of enemies as they are encountered. Gatt follows and fights alongside whatever other party members the player elected to bring, and his usefulness may alter the player's perception of him. This period of gameplay breaks up the introductory cutscenes from the final cutscene and provides action and possible flow. For the purposes of the story and points of reflection, periods of gameplay here break up these pauses, for if pauses in action are too lengthy the player may have difficulty focusing and not engage with them, much like a too-long lecture with no variation.

This interspersing of movement, combat, and pauses for cutscenes and dialogue culminates in a crisis cutscene which, in forcing the player to choose between Bull's Chargers and the culture of his homeland, requires reflection on the value conflict—not only between the two factions themselves, but also between everything that each stands for. Of course, the groundwork has been laid for the values the player associates with these factions and any emotions attached to the groups and their values long before this moment—the valuescapes are not recently constructed here but constructed and reconstructed several times already giving the player time to dwell on them. The opening dialogue of the scene reveals relief and celebration, as the signals are lit and the Qunari ship moves in to destroy the smuggling ship that was the mission target. As Iron Bull proudly points out how the Chargers completed their task first on the other hill, Gatt remarks, “I knew you gave them the easier job,” but the celebration soon turns sour as more enemies show up to attack the Chargers for a good position to fire on the ship. This opens the cutscene dialogue to the player's response:

**PC option:** They've still got time to fall back if you signal them now.

**Iron Bull:** [close-up on worried look] Yeah.

**Gatt:** Your men need to hold that position, Bull.



**Iron Bull:** [turns to Gatt, looming above him menacingly in the frame] They do that, they're dead.

**Gatt:** And if they don't, the Venatori retake it and the dreadnought is dead. You'd be throwing away an alliance between the Inquisition and the Qunari! You'd be declaring yourself Tal-Vashoth!

[A close-up on Bull reveals the scowl on his face.]

**Gatt:** With all you've given the Inquisition, half the Ben-Hassrath think you've betrayed us already! I stood up for you, Hissrad! I told them you would NEVER become Tal-Vashoth!

**Iron Bull:** [Looming over Gatt angrily in the frame again, resolute] They're MY men.

**Gatt:** I know. But you need to do what's right, Hissrad... For this alliance, and for the Qun. [There is a pleading in his voice and his eyes]

At this moment, the full weight of conflict between the Qunari values he was born into and the friends and cultural values he has adopted for his new role rests on Iron Bull. Even though the acting is digital, the emotion of that weight is captured quite well in the animation, from the facial expressions of relief transformed to scowling and the furrowed brow of indecision, to the shifting movement of Bull's shoulders. Freddie Prinze Jr.'s voice acting fills the gap with the complexity of emotion digital animation cannot yet convey. Iron Bull quickly turns to the PC, and so this weight is deflected to the player, who must consider the many values and their interactions as he has experienced them over the course of the game thus far. Only two options appear in the dialogue choice wheel this time, and it glows slightly, signaling the import of the decision: "Save the dreadnought" or "Save your men." This moment, and indeed portions of the rest of the game, will play out differently depending on the option chosen.

The player ultimately chooses the outcome, but the impact and weight of that choice will be experienced only through the interactions with NPC characters that follow it. For a player

who values friendship and loyalty to one's companions above potential utility or a demanding and rigid system of cultural values, the choice will likely be to save the men:

**PC option:** Call the retreat.

**Gatt:** [Alarmed] Don't!

[Iron Bull blows into his horn to signal his men. They start to retreat.]

**Iron Bull:** They're falling back.

[Gatt paces on the other side of the frame from Iron Bull and the PC, looking to the ground and shaking his head.]

**Gatt:** All these years, Hissrad, and you throw away all that you are. For what?

For this? For THEM? [pointing angrily at the PC]

**PC option:** His name is Iron Bull.

**Gatt:** [A close-up of his face looking disappointed] I suppose it is.

[A long shot follows as Gatt walks away, then cuts to Venatori at the other position as they gather fireballs and hurl them at the dreadnought. The camera cuts back to Iron Bull, who stoically waits and warns the PC of the dreadnought's impending demise, yet still winces when it explodes.]

This exchange sees a bit of relief expressed by Iron Bull at the escape of his men, while highlighting the conflict of values and everything this choice means. The lost utility of the alliance with the Qunari takes a back seat to the loss of Iron Bull's identity. He has thrown away all that he is, or at least, all that he thought he was. The more a player has engaged with Iron Bull and reflected on the Qunari value system he espouses, the greater she will feel the emotional weight of this decision. Bull's culture is one that considers those that leave it to be Tal-Vashoth—little more than beasts—and most Tal-Vashoth that Bull has encountered have in fact behaved as little more than beasts, lawless and dangerous. He faces not just the prospect of losing the culture of a distant homeland, but rather of unraveling his entire identity.

The crisis quest closes, as many major quests do, back at Skyhold, where a closing cutscene reiterates Bull's loss of identity alongside the loss of alliance, but also operates to reassure players of their decision. Gatt approaches to bitterly inform the PC that the Inquisition will no longer be receiving an alliance or reports through Iron Bull, who is now considered Tal-Vashoth.

**Iron Bull:** So much for that.

**PC option:** I'm proud of you, Bull.

**Iron Bull:** [Laughs] Thanks, Boss.

[Krem arrives in frame.]

**Iron Bull:** You're late.

**Krem:** Sorry, Chief. Still sore from fighting off all those Vints. Good to see you, Inquisitor.

**PC option:** How did the Chargers come out of the fight?

**Krem:** Just fine. Thanks to you and the Chief, we had plenty of time to fall back. Chief's even breaking open a case of Chasind Sack Mead for the Chargers tonight.

**Iron Bull:** [In mock anger] Damnit, Krem! That's the kind of thing you DON'T have to mention to the Inquisitor.

**Krem:** Sorry, Chief.

[Iron Bull sets himself and charges with his shield. Krem blocks this time.

Bull nods approvingly. There is a closeup as he smiles.]

**Iron Bull:** Ah, forget it. You're doing fine. [There is a pleased sigh.]

This sequence begins by revealing possible gameplay consequences of the player's choices. It ends, however, by showing Bull embracing his friendship with his men. The scene conveys a true sense of relief, and at least in the moment we can see Bull is happy with the values he has chosen. As players interpreting and navigating this valuescape, those values are, of course, ultimately values we have chosen. A scene such as this operates to reaffirm moral engagement

and choice, just as a character gaining experience and loot operates to reaffirm successful engagement with the flow of gameplay.

These scenes will progress very differently if the player elects to save the dreadnought and the alliance rather than The Chargers, in which case the player must bear witness to the loss of Bull's men and the gradual replacement of emotion with a resolution to more fully embrace his Qunari duties:

**PC option:** We need to hold that hill at all costs!

**Iron Bull:** ::sighs:: Yeah.

[The camera pulls back and fighting can be seen on the distant hill. There is a closeup of the PC again signaling dialogue options.]

**PC option:** Your soldiers are giving their lives for a good cause, Bull.

**Iron Bull:** No. WE'RE doing it for a good cause. Gaining an alliance, strengthening the Inquisition, something. [His face is sad.]

The Chargers don't care about any of that crap. They're giving their lives for ME.

**Gatt:** Hissrad... I'm sorry. I know that wasn't easy. [He looks concerned.]

**Iron Bull:** Doesn't matter. The Qun demanded it. [His voice is stern.]

[The camera cuts to the hill, where Tevinter forces are seen victorious, but too late to catch the dreadnought.]

**Iron Bull:** Dreadnought's clear. Let's get out of here.

The dialogue and vocal expressions make the initial sadness clear here, and the sense of responsibility for his men that Iron Bull holds. However, there is a transition toward the end of the scene to a kind of hardening, a resolve, as the emotion fades from his voice.

The closing cutscene still functions to reaffirm the player's decision in this case, but also carries the shift in values and emotions further, and punctuates that progression with a reminder that the conflict, or at least the pain from it, is still there:

**Gatt:** Inquisitor, my superiors have named you Basalit-An. It means  
 “Respected One.” We would be honored to join you in the fight  
 against Corypheus. You’ll have Qunari support on the seas as well as  
 our full intelligence network.

**PC option:** I look forward to working with your people.

**Gatt:** The feeling is mutual.

[The camera fixes on Iron Bull, who stands solemn with his arms crossed.]

**Gatt:** Hissrad... Marasas shokra.

**Iron Bull:** [Nodding] Panahedan, Gatt.

[Gatt takes his leave, and the camera centers once more on Iron Bull over the  
 PC’s shoulder as he turns.]

**Iron Bull:** A Qunari alliance. That’s a first.

**PC option:** Our more trusted agents can network with the Ben-Hassrath.

**Iron Bull:** Better than having both sides step on each others toes. I’ll pass  
 word to Red. Have a good one.

[The PC walks away, and the camera pans to follow Iron Bull. It seems as  
 though it will transition much like other cut-scenes, but there is suddenly a  
 jarring action. Iron Bull slams his fist into a post. The action is so abrupt and  
 forceful it conveys far more emotion than the dialogue could have. Bull leans  
 against the post. His face is mostly in shadow but there are streaks of  
 sunlight, enough to see his eye is closed, his face contorted in pain.]

This conversation is striking for the way it at first moves past Iron Bull’s loss and focuses on business. Everything from the formal language of address to the brief exchange between Iron Bull and Gatt in the Qunari tongue reinforces the dramatic shift made towards the rigid Qunari culture, overcoming the duality of Iron Bull’s identity. There is still some gravity to the stance and the expressions of the characters, but the emotions are muted. However, the nonverbal outburst of emotion at the end of the scene carries more strength because of that. A shift occurred, but the pain of that loss—loss of the second half of Bull’s life and identity—is still felt

and acknowledged. The scene conveys the pain of loss well, but to appreciate exactly *what* was lost the player must reflect on previous interactions with the Chargers, the values associated with that part of Bull's personality, and perhaps the stark contrast between Bull's former jovial attitude and his newfound solemnity.

My conception of ethics in video games places more importance on how we reflect and deliberate before and after particular choices than it does on what choices we ultimately make. Most of the ethical work of games lies not in what we do, but in whether we stop to consider the multitude of values that impact the actions we have taken or will take and in how we rationalize those actions. While a poignant point of reflection requires some exploration and build-up of the values on both sides of a conflict, games can and do sometimes imbue one side with more positive emotional triggers than another. One might argue that such a stance occurs with the two possible endings for Iron Bull's crisis quest. While each option includes dialogue meant to reassure the player of her choice, in the scene following the sacrifice of the Chargers the powerful emotional outburst at the end serves as an indictment of that choice in a manner unparalleled in the other cutscene. If one chooses to save the Chargers, the game prompts reflection on Bull's loss of Qunari identity later, but in the short term the joy and relief of the Chargers surviving far outweigh Gatt's condemnation or the loss of the instrumental but still somewhat abstract concept of an alliance between the Inquisition and the Qunari. One could argue such difference ultimately serves as a condemnation of the instrumentalist choice, rubbing the player's face in the fact that she chose to sacrifice the lives of loyal friends for some perceived greater good. Of course, the player will not know this unless they play through both choices either by playing the entire game twice or by loading a previous save. However, the game clearly prompts the player to reflect on the weight of this decision and perhaps do the work

of rationalizing the choice in spite of the negative emotion attached. In that sense, it invites a continuing engagement of these valuescapes.

The crisis quest contains a cross-section of the broader range of values experienced throughout the game that accrue around this NPC. One could certainly make an argument for the experience of values through this self-contained quest but, even if considering the cutscenes and gameplay of the entire quest arc, it does not fully convey why these moments of reflection are so poignant. The temporal structure of quest scenes towards points of reflection are crucial, but they are only as poignant and engaging as the valuescapes the player is called to reflect upon. Throughout this section, I trace the import of these scenes back to previous points of reflection as the valuescapes build on each other and continually call back to their expression in previous moments of the player's experience. The complexity of these valuescapes and the frequency with which they are triggered makes these points of reflection far more engaging than those discussed in the previous chapter. If we care, feel, or agonize over these values, it is because we have had prior interactions with Iron Bull and his men, The Chargers, throughout the game. These experiences are necessary to establish Bull's camaraderie with his men, the value systems he is torn between, and the growing conflict of those values in relation to other characters. Only through this repeated interaction, interspersed with the ongoing life of gameplay, may a player form some sort of attachment to the NPCs as simulated persons with values accrued around them.

#### **4.4 Aftermath: Continuing Reflections on Choices Made**

The impact of the value conflict does not end at the closing moment of a quest, however. A game like *Dragon Age* calls on the player to reflect on past decisions and values sometimes many hours further into the game. In the case of Iron Bull's quest, the game confronts the player

with its repercussions regardless of which decision was made. At one point, probably after a few more quests or time exploring, the PC receives word that Iron Bull wants to see her on top of the battlements. If the player chose to save the Chargers, shunning the Qunari alliance, the PC approaches to find some assassins attacking Bull. After a fight and a brief exchange about the attempt, this dialogue cutscene addresses Bull's struggle with the loss of his identity more directly:

**PC option:** I hoped the Ben-Hassrath would let you go.

**Iron Bull:** They did. [A bit of sadness or solemnity in his voice.] Sending two guys with blades against ME? That's not a hit. That's a formality. Just making it clear that I'm Tal-Vashoth. [Sighs and shakes his head with a grumble.] Tal-Va-fucking-shoth.

**PC option:** You've acted like a Tal-Vashoth for years. That didn't change you. Neither does this.

**Iron Bull:** That was just a role. THIS is my life. As one of those... I killed HUNDREDS of Tal-Vashoth in Seheron. Bandits, murderers, bastards who turned their back on the Qun. And now I'm one of them.

**PC option:** Bullshit! You're a good man!

**Iron Bull:** Without the Qun to live by...

**PC option:** Hey! You're a GOOD man. If the Ben-Hassrath don't see that, it's their loss.

**Iron Bull:** Thanks, Boss. [Sighs] Anyway, I'll get this cleaned up and let Red know what happened. Boss? [Spoken with more emotion.] Whatever I miss, whatever I regret... THIS is where I want to be. [His voice becomes more jovial.] Whenever you need an ass kicked, The Iron Bull is with you.

Here, we see Iron Bull struggling with the loss of his identity, with becoming something he has been fighting for most of his adult life. While he was initially happy after the decision was made, that was clearly about how highly he values the friendship of his men and how happy he was



they were alive. The loss of his Qunari identity still weighs on him, and the player is prompted to reflect on that here. When choosing between two sets of competing values, sometimes you can't go back.

If the player chose to save the ship and let Chargers die, the consequences of that value choice unveil a bit more slowly. This choice sees Iron Bull rededicated to the culture of his homeland and resolved not to allow such a conflict of identity to develop again. In this case a similar scene occurs at the battlements (with no assassins in this case), which serves to mourn the loss of lives and show Iron Bull rededicating himself to his Qunari nature:

**PC:** You wanted to see me?

[Iron Bull motions for the PC to follow him further along the battlements.]

**Iron Bull:** If you've got a minute, yes. Wanted some help dealing with this.

[It becomes clear he has a jar in his hand.] The Bull's Chargers. What's left of them anyway. Krem, Rocky, Dalish, all of 'em. Dead for the Iron Bull. A man who never really existed.

**PC option:** Should I start calling you Hissrad?

**Iron Bull:** Nah, it'd just confuse everyone. Besides, you're mangling the pronunciation. But I think I'm done leading mercenaries into battle.

**PC option:** You can still be the Iron Bull.

**Iron Bull:** I plan to. Chargers or no, it's a fun role, and I like Orlesian food. But I've been away from the Qun for too many years. This was a good reminder of who I really am. Now I can serve you and the Inquisition honestly.

[Iron Bull and the Inquisitor step to the wall as he opens the jar.]

**Iron Bull:** Sorry, guys. I don't know any prayers from the Chantry, or whatever Rocky and Dalish believed in. Ataash varin kata. Asit Tal-Eb.

[Iron Bull dumps the ashes, and he and the PC turn towards each other.]

**PC option:** If this had all just been an act, you wouldn't be mourning them

right now.

**Iron Bull:** What, like the Qunari don't mourn their dead?

**PC option:** Not dead outsiders, I'm guessing.

**Iron Bull:** Yeah, maybe not. But even if this was all just an act, it was real for them. They were mine. For every bloody battlefield, we'll gladly raise a cup. No matter what tomorrow holds. [A slight sadness creeps into his tone as he speaks these lines. He lowers his head at the last line.] Thanks, Boss. Didn't want to do this alone.

The resolution is not that the value conflict no longer exists in any way—the feeling of loss remains—but Iron Bull has decided to not put himself in the position where he has to choose again. He resolutely rededicates himself to the Qun and the values of his homeland. At this moment, the player may see this as either a bad or good thing—the scene is ambiguous enough that the player may take a number of emotional/value positions regarding Bull's choice—yet there is still some resolution here.

The ultimate consequence of choosing the ship over the Chargers does not confront the player until near the very end of the final DLC (downloaded content) expansion for the game. Such content is generally released many months after the game's initial release, in this case almost a year, so players cannot be sure the effects of their decisions have been resolved even after beating the initial game. This example also demonstrates how calling back to previous decisions and values can still strike an emotional chord with the player. During the interim, the player may spend quite a bit of time in Iron Bull's presence, and may be under the impression nothing has changed. In this DLC, the Qunari return ostensibly as the key foes this time, but Iron Bull seems to help at every turn nevertheless. However, in the midst of one of the final battles, one of the opposing Qunari shouts a command and Iron Bull turns, betraying the PC and the other companions he has fought alongside with only the words,

“Nothing personal, Bas.” It should be noted that “Bas” is a Qunari word that, if the player has been following the lore presented in the game, she will know is how Qunari refer to outsiders. It literally means, “thing.” The slight difference from “Boss,” which is how Iron Bull normally addresses the PC also makes a statement. But there is no time to process yet, as the player must immediately deal with a very difficult fight. Iron Bull must be defeated, and there is no dying cutscene, no chance for farewell or questioning why as some games might provide in a similar situation. Only in the calm after the fight is the player given time to reflect, and perhaps he will revisit the values negotiated and the moment Iron Bull turned back towards the Qun and away from valuing friendship and loyalty. The lack of dying cutscene, the seeming indifference of the game, makes these silent moments after the battle so striking. It does not feel real, a bewildering betrayal. Depending on how much the player takes a liking to Iron Bull’s character over the course of play, this betrayal and being forced to kill a beloved character may hit hard. In this case it is the lack of cutscene that may prompt reflection, as having no explanation readily given may lead to reflection on all the values and decisions held in relation to the NPC. The uncertainty of the cause (one must either play through twice or consult the Internet to know there was an alternative) may prompt a re-examination of a number of feelings, values, and actions the player has experienced over the course of the game. As with the other consequence, this ending shows some choices are irreversible, but it also shows one may not know the impact of a choice until long after it has been made.

The development of this particular conflict of values accruing around the NPC Iron Bull, realized over the full course of a hundred hour game is only one among many. Through the development of one character that accompanies the PC through the game world, the game prompts the player to morally engage with philosophic values such as individualistic vs.

communitarian societies, emotional values such as friendship and loyalty, and the struggle of living a life caught between two value systems. Such a feat could not be accomplished without the pauses, the in-between points of reflection, yet these would not be so powerful were they not set within a larger flow of gameplay, inserted into the player's daily life. There are other value conflicts as well, accruing around other NPCs, and occasionally the valuescapes of two NPCs will come into conflict, interacting to create a richer tapestry spread across the game (as noted with Solas's intervention into Iron Bull's value conflict). The execution of these techniques in a game like *Dragon Age: Inquisition* turns a cliché high fantasy tale of confronting an evil wizard into a journey rich with emotional and moral engagement, more revealing of characters than quest goals.

## 5 CHAPTER FOUR: EVOKING VALUES AND PROMPTING REFLECTION THROUGH VIRTUAL SPACES

The preceding chapters examined how the temporal arrangement of events, the alternation of pause and action, can emphasize points of reflection on values and, on a larger scale, how valuescapes can form around powerful cues in the form of NPCs over the course of a game. While I asserted that points of reflection and the values conflicts considered therein have an impact that stretches far beyond gameplay goals, my analysis remained closely aligned with the quest systems of these games by necessity. However, another powerful cue—the virtual space or environment of the game—demonstrates the power of moral reflection and valuescapes even outside of the quest system. Certainly, quests play a large role in the value associations that form around the oft-visited locations of game hubs, but even in such cases other factors prove equally important. Both within and outside the hubs, the spaces a player moves through and the

objects within those spaces can not only evoke values but also prompt poignant moments of reflection. In this chapter I will return to memory research to argue that space is an important cue for valuescapes and then build upon previous research on space in video games. My analysis of space in games involves both a macro and a micro level: on the macro level I analyze how valuescapes form around game hubs over the course of play partially through the quest structure but also from other factors, while on the micro level I demonstrate how the particular shape and layout of spaces combined with values attached to objects in those spaces can prompt moral reflection completely disconnected from the quest system.

### **5.1 Space and Long-term Value Associations**

Research in cognitive psychology strongly suggests the integration of visual experience, mental imagery, and memory, supporting the notion of values as triggered by imagery and spatial layouts in a game. As Cooper and Lang (1996) note, “much of our remembrance of persons, situations, and occurrences from the past is accomplished by nonverbal thinking,” and, “such thinking seems, phenomenologically, to be decidedly perceptual in character” (p. 129). Such “visual-spatial” memory is often set apart from other types of memory by virtue of the specificity of its representations (p. 130). Cooper and Lang distinguish between “imagery,” which “can be generated in the absence of any appropriate or corresponding external stimulus,” and “visual-spatial representations used for processes of recognition” which need to be “matched against relevant, externally available information” (p. 130). In essence, all visual-spatial memory ties back to specific memories of past people, places, and things, though some of these memories (such as object recognition and cognitive mapping<sup>14</sup>) require external cues. Pearson (2006) found

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that the cognitive mapping referenced here and elsewhere in the chapter falls in a different tradition from Frederic Jameson’s use of cognitive mapping in terms of ideology.

in his review of the literature that “mental images can integrate information from short and long-term memory, and imagery has been linked to the formation of episodic autobiographical memories” (p. 143). This linkage shows the strong connection between the visual-spatial portion of our cognition and some of our most value-laden personal memories, demonstrating the viability of game spaces as cues for valuescapes to form around.

Not all spaces will be important for value associations, however, just as not all NPCs have complex valuescapes built around them. Prompting the player to reflect and attach valuescapes within game spaces necessitates that the space stand out in some way, and will also benefit from repetition in the same manner as NPC interactions do. Visually distinctive places are important to memory, especially to episodic memory. As Ryan, Hoscheidt, and Nadel (2008) discuss in distinguishing the research on episodic and semantic memories, a key difference is that “episodic memory allows the rememberer to have the conscious experience... of being mentally present once again within the spatial-temporal context of the original experience,” which “presupposes that the individual can retrieve the spatial-temporal context in which the to-be-remembered event occurred” (p. 5). Following this, they note that in studies, “episodic memory tasks, by definition, require the retrieval of contextual information about time and place” (p. 13). Given these requirements, Ryan, Hoscheidt, and Nadel (2008) propose that, “cues that are sufficiently distinctive” (p. 13) should be important to the encoding and recall of these types of memories. Thus, the game design emphasis on points of interest (POIs) not only serves to draw players’ attention and lead their movement, but may also function to improve visual distinctiveness for the purposes of memory.

Following the memory research on repetition outlined in previous chapters, it stands to reason that repeated visits to certain spaces, or repetition of similar features or familiar items in

the *mise-en-scène*, would enhance player engagement with any associated values by strengthening memory traces. While seeing similar spaces repeatedly may build and trigger valuescapes, revisiting the exact same space serves an additional function of emphasizing the player's temporal progression through the game. Many games utilize repetition of the same spatial context to evoke not only a comparison of shifting narratives in the setting but also the player's personal journey through the game from then until now. Such a journey also emphasizes the evolution of values and capabilities that occurred along the way. Revisiting a location frequented early in the game, for example, draws comparisons between one's valuescapes and approach to the game world at the beginning and the ultimate development of those valuescapes. Thus, the distinctiveness of spaces, as well as their repetition (either revisiting the exact same space or similar environments) remains crucial for building valuescapes and prompting moral reflection.

The field of game studies shows some precedent for considering values as they attach themselves to game spaces, though they stop short of a detailed account of what aspects of the space evoke these values and how such values might interact with each other. Key contributions to this discussion begin with Jenkins (2004), but notably continue with Nitsche (2008) and Fahlenbrach (2016). For our purposes, Jenkins (2004) offers a key contribution with his application of environmental storytelling to games, noting that they “can evoke pre-existing narrative associations; they can provide a staging ground where narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their *mise-en-scène*; or they provide resources for emergent narratives” (p. 123). The “evocative spaces” Jenkins discusses here largely relate to adaptations between media, given the intervention his essay is attempting to make, but conceptually they cover any pre-existing narrative associations that might be triggered by things

in the game environment. Such narrative associations apply either to other game texts or, I would argue, to previous associations from within the same text. I would label these associations inter-textual and intra-textual values respectively, and Jenkins notably focuses on the inter-textual rather than values built up within a single text. His argument regarding space as a staging ground for events makes way for episodic narratives and stories to be experienced as worthwhile in their own right even if they have no bearing to the overarching “plot” of the game (p. 124-125). The concept of embedded narrative, however, is where Jenkins truly makes his mark. Jenkins notes that narrative information infuses the game world by necessity, for “essential narrative information must be presented redundantly across a range of spaces and artifacts, because one cannot assume the player will necessarily locate or recognize the significance of any given element” (p. 126). Here, Jenkins refers to a number of narrative-laden (and, I would argue, value-laden) clues in the game world that invite the player to piece them together into a more overarching narrative, mentioning in his example such activities as “sorting through documents, deciphering codes, making sense of garbled transmissions” (p. 127). This concept allows us to look for values even beyond the scripted cutscenes and segments of gameplay forced on the player and to move toward an understanding of the narrative, emotional, and even moral cues presented as the player moves through the game world. Ultimately, Jenkins puts game spaces on the map with this essay, but he uses them primarily as a tool to make a point in a larger debate about narrative, therefore leaving much of the specific analysis of these elements unexplored.

Nitsche (2008) takes the previous approach toward understanding the concept of space in games and expands it drastically, presenting an examination of game space from multiple angles, and with an eye for interdisciplinary contributions. He expands on Jenkins’ work, in particular, with a look at cognitive mapping and his own reconceptualization of narrative in game spaces



where he proposes an idea similar to my concept of valuescapes though centered exclusively on game spaces, and going no further than gesturing towards the possibility of ethical engagement with values:

*A story map* is the result of this reading of the game space in combination with the directed evocative narrative elements encountered along the way. The game space, the events it includes, and the position of the player in relation to them are dramatized and contextualized. The narrative evocative elements at work do their best to affect the cognitive map. The result is the story map that consists of a form of cognitive map grown from the interplay of presentation and functionality, guidance and player positioning. Ultimately, every story map is a cognitive map that has been heavily influenced by evocative narrative elements as the player experienced them in the game space (p. 227).

Nitsche's argument here does not go against Jenkins's point, but rather expands and clarifies it, drawing on cognitive research to provide a more detailed theory. The "story map" in essence lines up with all the space-associated valuescapes in a game, though as a collective, rather than distinguishing the lines of each individual valuescape and the interactions between them. Following this, Nitsche suggests that the shape of game spaces, in addition to aiding navigation in a conceptual way, could evoke moods and narratives, offering themselves up for the player's interpretation. However, he makes little mention of the piecemeal bits of narrative information and clues that serve as the focus for Jenkins, instead speaking broadly of mood and "the development of a past, present, and future meaning of the game world" (p. 232). Nitsche's chapter on story maps is unfortunately, a short one, lacking an involved case study, but it does function as a turn towards the cognitive in this line of research. He also briefly addresses the idea that the player's interaction with and meaning-making from the game world is a process experienced over time, in memories of the past and projections of possible futures as well as navigation through the present. However, he does not move to provide a more focused look at what that temporal experience might be like or how the shape of spaces in the game world might affect it.

Fahlenbrach (2016) suggests in more detail how spaces might evoke values with her look at “conceptual metaphors.” She focuses on “affective spaces... understood as the dynamic interplay between the affective and emotional stimuli provided by the ludic, narrative and aesthetic structures of a game space, and the experiential flow while playing in these spaces” (p. 141). Fahlenbrach makes the assertion that these settings, rather than characters within them, are “a key dimension for representing fictional emotions that players might recognize in a reflexive manner” (p. 141). Her call to consider how emotions “can be reinforced by the creation of audiovisual metaphors in the spatial setting of a video game” (p. 142) offers a unique perspective on the very shape of game spaces, though it perhaps over-privileges the spatial dimension compared to the other elements of a game. While Fahlenbrach’s (2016) discussion of the emotions elicited in these spaces is ultimately too limited, in my view, it provides some backing for the idea of emotional-cognitive associations activated in game worlds. Beginning from the research on paradigm scenarios, which she argues are even more effective in game play than film viewing, Fahlenbrach proposes these scenarios to be “building blocks in the affective structure of many games... initiating evolutionary and culturally trained affective responses and appraisals in players” (p. 144). To her credit, Fahlenbrach notes the simplicity of the emotions evoked in these paradigm scenarios, which trend towards the most basic emotions. She advances the notion of metaphor as a more nuanced tool.

The strength of Fahlenbrach’s (2016) argument lies with bringing in embodied affect, as “conceptual metaphors... enable players to interact with image schemata established in the spatial structure of the game spaces in a sensory-motor way” (p. 145). In her analysis, Fahlenbrach examines the opposition between Batman and the Joker in *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, pointing to such spatial metaphors as “good is up... bad is down... sane is up... insane is

down,” (p. 149), but also more complex metaphors such as “madness is a closed building... madness is a maze” (p. 150). She argues that, “the audiovisual representation of the settings and architecture provides a metaphoric design that manifests prominent emotion metaphors of madness... rooted in western culture” (p. 150) and that these metaphors are experienced and actualized through gameplay. Fahlenbrach’s analysis demonstrates the cuing of cultural values within game spaces, but does not address whether players might be prompted to consciously reflect on these meanings and under what conditions they might do so. Furthermore, the metaphors she identifies remain fairly general across the game as a whole, without an understanding of how particular locations or types of settings might stand out within a game. My work examines more specific patterns as the game unfolds in a temporal experience for the player, both as those patterns build up over the length of a game from several discrete experiences and how those patterns unfold at the micro level when navigating a particular space.

The best sites to examine how game spaces accrue valuescapes at the macro level, over the length of a game, are sites the player visits repeatedly throughout the play experience. Games will often encourage or force players to revisit the exact same spatial contexts at different points over the course of play, and I have suggested that repetition makes these contexts prime sites for establishing values and revisiting or evolving those values later on. Sometimes, a game might force or entice players away from the area where their journeys began for a long period of time, only to return later. More commonly, RPGs will feature hubs—familiar areas where the player may rest, restock, complete quests or receive new quests that will direct them back out to explore the larger world of the game. We can return to episodic memory research to hypothesize why these sites may be so important. In an object learning study, Nadel et al. (2008) found that learning new information within the same spatial context reactivated and altered the memories

previously established in that place, suggesting “a critical role for context in determining whether memories of events are reactivated and updated” (p. 48). More specifically, they note that “exposure to a familiar context activates not only the hippocampal representation of that context,” related to cognitive mapping, “but also the memory traces of events that occurred in that context” (p. 49). If the memories established in places such as hubs are emotionally and morally engaging, then revisiting these locations serves the dual purpose of reviving those memories and altering them. In some cases this might serve to strengthen the values initially established, but it may also usefully revise or even draw multiple values into conflict with each other.

### 5.1.1 Case Study of *Skyrim*’s Game Hubs

In an open-world game such as *Skyrim*, game hubs are important sites of repeated interaction that establish and evolve the moral and narrative values at play in the game. Like many role-playing games, *Skyrim* utilizes hubs in the form of towns where the majority of non-hostile NPCs may be found, and where the player may drop her guard and restock supplies, as well as sell or store items picked up in the course of her adventures. I previously described the temporal experience of hubs: a slowed experience of time lacking urgency, with numerous points of interest and invitations for interruption of gameplay to be found in NPC conversations, but also little in the way of action. Action does take place in game hubs, but usually in the form of slow navigation from place to place rather than intense action. Instead, the alternation between reflection and flow here takes place on a larger scale, between the relative pause of the hubs and the flow-heavy experiences the player initiates in the dangerous lands surrounding them. While game goals in the form of quests or searching for loot may take a player anywhere in *Skyrim*’s vast world, it is impossible to advance the overarching plot of the game (not to mention the many

sidequests and faction quests) without frequently returning to most of these hubs. The hubs, in turn, often initiate many of the tasks the player seeks outside their confines. Furthermore, while merchants might be met on the roads, and supplies may be found while exploring, these town hubs are the most reliable place to secure these goods. Finally, carry weight restrictions built into the system of the game encourage the player to frequently sell excess items for gold, or to store them away for later in one of the many houses that become available—all activities that require visiting and revisiting these hub towns.

Each hub town has its own unique appearance, and to a certain extent one might argue for many of these towns the appearance and layout, in a manner similar to what Fahlenbrach (2016) suggests, reflects something thematic about the spaces and the kinds of quests and other narrative events that occur within. However, while Fahlenbrach's conceptual metaphors are compelling, an analysis of *Skyrim*'s hubs will reveal that we need more to explain the full impact of hubs—we need to pay attention to our experience with these hubs as valuescapes accrue around them over time, and we need to look at how multiple valuescapes in the game are drawn into comparison. The emotions we feel from engaging with a space are partially born from the space itself, but also arise from our comparison of that space with other spaces and with events experienced in and around these spaces.

One of the central plots in the game revolves around a cultural and religious civil war in the province of Skyrim between traditionalists who want an independent nation (Stormcloaks) and those supporting Imperial control. This plot provides a good structure for a case study of value differences in *Skyrim*'s hubs, as well as some of the failings of *Skyrim*'s use of space to prompt moral reflection. There are the two strongholds of opposing sides in that war that evoke very different value sets—Windhelm and Solitude. Windhelm, seat of power for the Nord

traditionalists, is a frigid and stern place—its steep, dark, overbearing walls enclosing an always-snowy cityscape that offers very little beauty or ornamentation. The space of the city itself evokes a feeling of oppression throughout, while different sections of the city also evoke a mixture of desperation and determination. Windhelm evidences monumental architecture designed to intimidate above all else. Everywhere a player goes within the city its high, dark walls will seem to close in around her, creating narrow alleyways with bleak views and few options of navigation. The sunlight is dim and indirect, save for in the entry square, and the looming walls provoke a sense of claustrophobia. While that atmosphere pervades the entire city, it surrounds the Gray Quarter especially, a district where all the city's Dark Elves live as refugees since their homeland was lost to a volcanic eruption. Things are worse in the Gray Quarter, but Windhelm seems in disrepair even in the wealthier districts, with stones missing from walls and buildings while rubble sits out in the open even along the stairs leading to the palace. Such a state of architectural collapse could stand as a metaphor for an emotional collapse into despair, and the icicles lining almost every building add to that sense of desperation. However, if one looks beyond the architecture, strictly speaking, and into the marks the people of Windhelm make upon the space, a thread of determination can also be found. The people of Windhelm still go about their day: working the forge, chopping firewood, setting up stalls in the bleak marketplace, and spending time drinking and listening to songs at the inn which holds as prominent a place in the city as the palace—a gigantic dark building in the shape of a Viking longhouse, obscuring anything else from the main gate. The Dark Elves in the Gray Quarter still persist and run businesses despite their seclusion from the rest of the city. Oppression, desperation, and determination infuse the very space of the city of Windhelm.



*Figure 4 Windhelm Outer Gate*



*Figure 5 Windhelm Narrow Lanes*





*Figure 6 Windhelm's Palace*



*Figure 7 Windhelm's Gray Quarter*

The layout and architecture of Solitude, the seat of Imperial power in Skyrim, evokes an entirely different set of emotions—its sprawling districts sit high in the open upon a cliff, with



the beautiful palace district set at the top of a natural rock formation that juts out over the nearby bay. Solitude evokes prosperity and an earnest optimism in its open environs and its ornate buildings and interiors. If one were to judge by the more simplistic emotions of Fahlenbrach's (2016) conceptual metaphors, associating up and light with good, the more brightly lit spaces and the height of the city itself would make it a beacon of good. A more careful examination of particular locales in the city evokes more nuanced emotions, however. The open squares of Solitude, frequently adorned with patches of bright-colored flowers, evoke a sense of hope. The earnest optimism also infuses the layout of the palace, which stands as more of a noble manor than a defensive structure, and shows itself in the way that the throne merely sits at ground level in a cozy chamber within full reach of those gathered and engaging on their level. Though there are a couple of beggars, there are no slums in Solitude. In stark contrast to Windhelm, everything is clean, in good condition, and decorated to be aesthetically pleasing or even awe-inspiring rather than stern and intimidating. The only architectural break from this sense of prosperous ease lies with the Imperial Legion headquarters at Castle Dour, but despite the depressing name even this space is more ornate and open than the spaces of Windhelm. Judging purely on the architecture of these affective spaces, not only does Solitude exude a more pleasant range of emotions, it seems to evoke no negative emotions whatsoever.



*Figure 8 Solitude's Outer Gate*



*Figure 9 Children Playing in Solitude's Market Square*



*Figure 10 Solitude Facing the Palace*

The valuescapes that attach themselves to spaces in a game do not arise purely from the spaces themselves, however. One must also pay attention to what goes on within these spaces and how the experience of the spaces unfolds in time. Given the role of hubs in the quest structure of RPGs, the quests that lead players into and out of these hubs are of course an important part of the values attached to these spaces. Neither Windhelm nor Solitude are anywhere near where the player of *Skyrim* begins his journey, and players are unlikely to head to them immediately. Thus, I cannot speak to exactly when the first experience of each city would occur and likely each player will visit in a slightly different order. Early in the game, through contact with one of the soldiers or by overhearing conversations, player will likely receive both a quest to join the Stormcloak Rebellion in Windhelm and a quest to join the Imperial army in Solitude. Players may pursue either, or may put such quests off, but a number of the quests received after spending a little time around the starting area of the game send the player to places

near both cities. Given the other function of cities as places to rest and sell or purchase items, being in the area for a quest goal will often mean a visit to nearby cities as well.

The types of quests found within a game hub color the player's experiences of the spaces themselves, added to and enhancing the values and emotions evoked through the physical layout of the spaces. The oppressive and stern environment of Windhelm reflects many of the quests one might find here. Besides the civil war quests, among these quests are many quests dealing with the overt racism local Nords bear for all outsiders, but especially the Dark Elf refugees from Morrowind that stay in the Gray Quarter. Additional quests are all gloomy, from tracking down a serial killer of young women to an orphaned boy trying to summon assassins to exact vengeance on an abusive orphanage in another city. The most uplifting quest is to help a dying old man find an artifact he has searched for all of his life, but even this quest is a hidden two-part quest that for a time leaves the player thinking the man will die with only the broken remnants of the artifact discovered and will only have a happier ending later in the game. The quests in this hub prompt the player to reflect on the evils and misfortunes of the world, on hatred and loss.

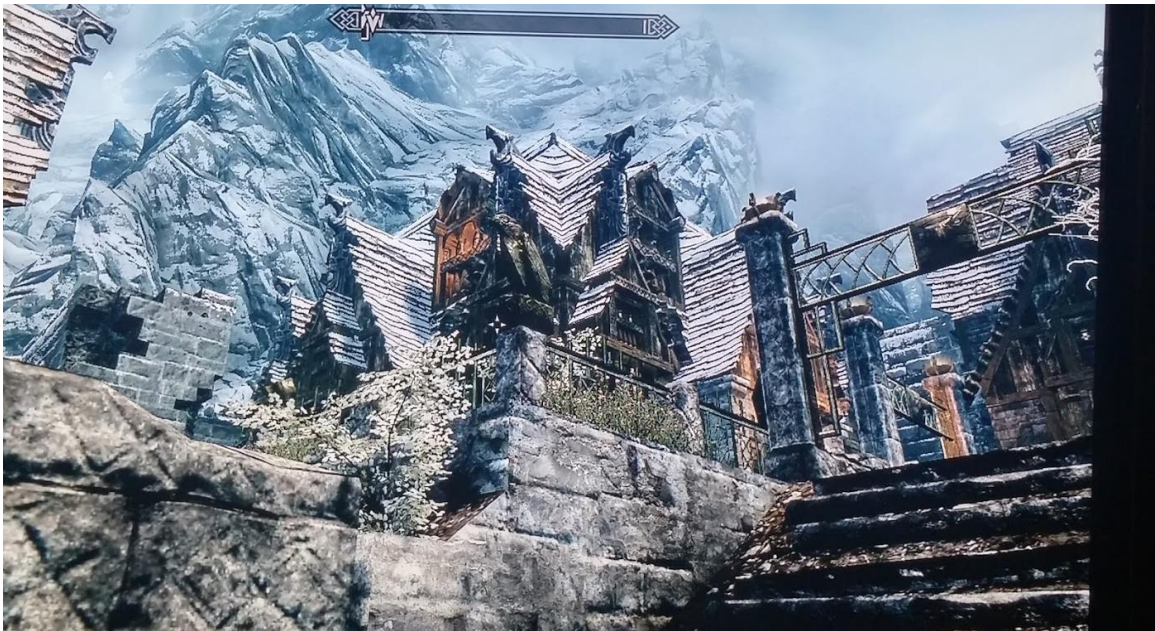
Solitude's quests reflect to some extent to earnest optimism and prosperity that its physical appearance evokes; yet, some darker nuance begins to seep in when considering the quests initiated here. Some of the earliest quests one might happen upon (assuming one explores the merchant district before moving further into the city) involve a sort of celebratory materialism. One quest involves delivering a special order of rum from the local tavern to someone in the court, another involves wearing a fancy outfit to an audience with Solitude's ruler as a kind of walking advertisement for a clothing merchant. However, other quests begin to reveal a more troubled city than the bright surroundings would suggest. Some of the quests suggest the darker side of prosperity—greed and envy of those who have wealth. A wine

merchant's spices are being held up at the dock by the East Empire Company, which is trying to tax an exorbitant fee for their release. A shady character in the marketplace subtly suggests putting out the fire in a nearby lighthouse in order to crash a merchant ship and loot its cargo. Other quests one might find early on while exploring the city suggest a court that is out of touch with the culture of its people and dismissive of some of their problems. The ruler, Jarl Elisif (former queen of Skyrim) has banned a popular yearly festival because it involves burning an effigy of a king so soon after Skyrim's king was murdered at the start of the rebellion, and the local Bard's College wishes to find some way to reverse this decision. At court, Jarl Elisif hears the plea of a citizen from an outlying village about strange happenings in a nearby cave. Though she initially declares that she will help, her court advisors convince her not to send soldiers to investigate. The quests that begin in Solitude, while largely in line with the outward appearance of the city, also add additional nuance and evoke darker values such as greed and contempt that occur alongside prosperity.

The repetition of hub visits, while often sparked by quests, thus moves beyond merely considering the content of quests and necessitates understanding the unfolding temporal experience of the game as I described. What the player does while away from these hubs also contributes to the player's interaction with the valuescape attached to a place. Between visits, the player encounters other spaces within the game, each with their own distinct valuescape built up over a separate set of interactions. In moving between places—between two different major hubs, between the wilderness and the hub, or between an outlying settlement and a larger city hub—the valuescapes of those places may clash or cross over. An example of this process unrelated to *Skyrim*'s quests shows itself in a comparison of architecture between the hubs of Windhelm and Solitude and other locales throughout Skyrim. In particular, I want to examine



how a player might form any attachment whatsoever to the foreboding city of Windhelm and how a player might find anything amiss in the city of Solitude without considering quest content. Though the intimidating walls and dark alleys of Windhelm's streets are unlike anything else in  *Skyrim* , the internal décor and some architectural elements of the buildings within these walls draw comparisons to other places the player has experienced. Indeed, the roof structures of the buildings and the layout and decorations inside are quite similar to most small towns and buildings throughout the game world. Windhelm's environs may primarily evoke oppression, but within that oppression lie numerous similarities that almost feel like home in that they, perhaps subconsciously, call to mind the various inns and hamlets the player frequents as well as the first city the player likely experienced in the game. Despite its problems, the player may associate Windhelm with being quintessentially  *Skyrim* , and if they have positive values attached to the people of  *Skyrim*  or the various places they've visited, those might allow the player to form some attachment to Windhelm.



*Figure 11 Windhelm Roofs*

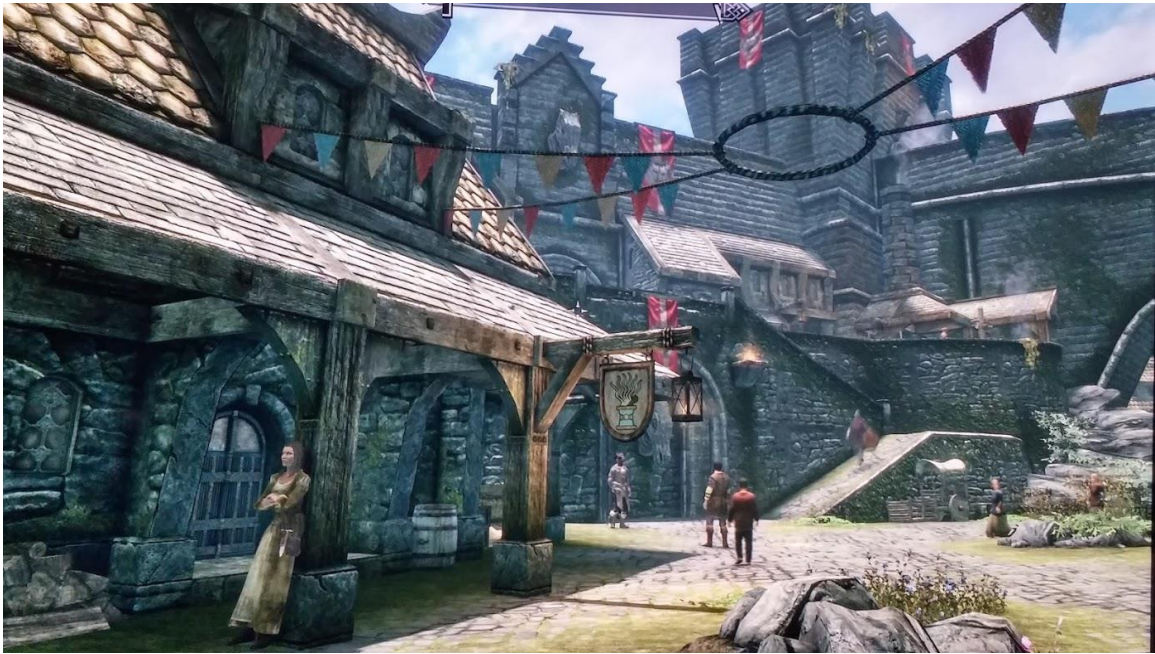


*Figure 12 Typical Roofs Found Elsewhere in Skyrim*

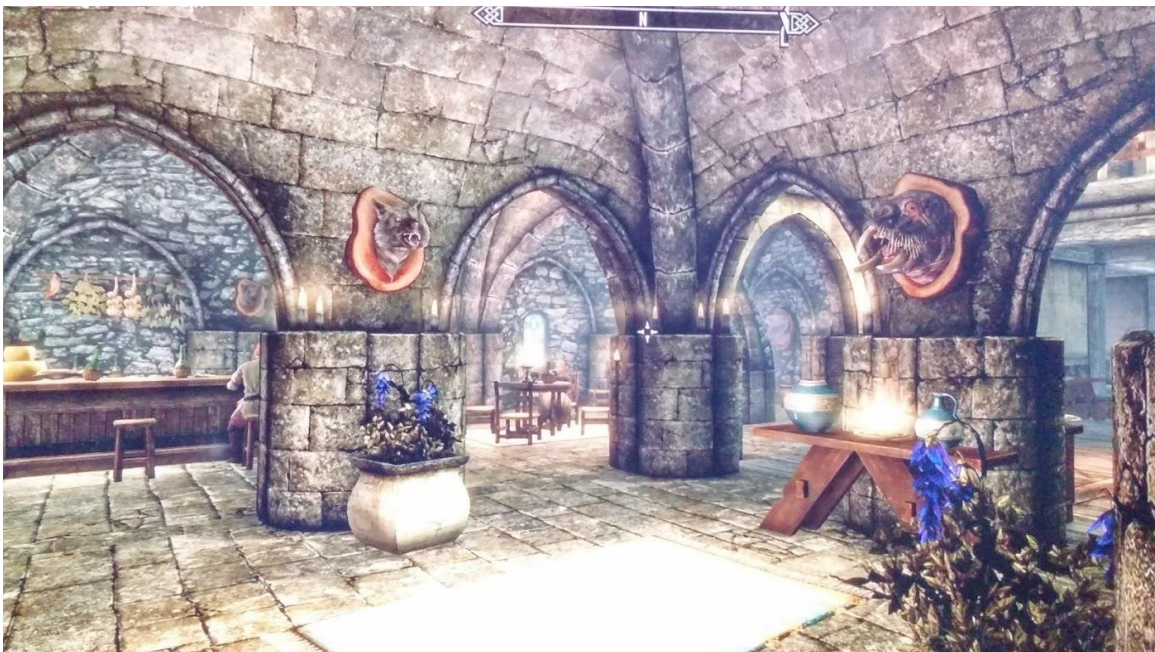
Solitude by contrast, appears removed from most other places in the province. While most locations in the game adopt a Nordic architecture strongly inspired by the Viking style, only trace amounts of this style carry over into Solitude. The first impression of Solitude is that of a more stereotypical medieval city one might find as a tourist attraction, with more stone and thick wooden beams, less angles and more arches, and flags hung on string between buildings as though a celebration has just taken place. The interiors are almost cathedral-like with interior support arches, and the décor more closely resembles a noble manor than the rustic furnishings found throughout the rest of the province. The outer walls and castle walls in Solitude have turrets, unlike other locales, and the palace breaks the mold even further with its grand blue domes. All of these features establish Solitude as set apart and out of touch with the rest of Skyrim, perhaps befitting its name. We might, in line with Fahlenbrach (2016), simplistically read “up” as good, but if we look past Solitude as a singular locale and also examine it in comparison to other spaces then “up” can also be read to evoke lording over or being set apart



from the common folk and the everyday life of the surrounding spaces. A comparison of different spaces alone thus arrives at the nuance also garnered from examining quest content, and the two means of evoking values will reinforce each other over the course of play.



*Figure 13 Solitude Market from Entrance*



*Figure 14 Solitude Inn*



We can thus identify interesting conjunctions of spatial layouts, quests, and values, but the key strength of hubs is that the player visits them over and over again, reactivating and altering previous memories each time she does so, and therefore setting these values in relation to each other. The more often a player returns to a city, the more attached to that city she is likely to be, as the layout of the place becomes familiar and memories of the place become strong in her mind. In this manner, while the kind of conceptual metaphors Fahlenbrach (2016) mentions may indeed be operating here, they are enabled by the shape of the player's pattern of play over the course of the game, and the timing and repetition of numerous interactions within these spaces are just as important as the thematic representations of the layout in the way that they draw comparisons to other places and other valuescapes. The thematic connections I make regarding the quests mentioned above do not occur all at once. They are patterned over time as the player visits and interacts with these hubs, stays for a bit, heads back out into the larger game world, and then returns to repeat the cycle. Each iteration reinforces the previous values the player has picked up on and associated with the place, yet adds new specificity in the process.

### **5.1.2 Micro-level Analysis of Space and Values Through POIs in *Skyrim***

I have discussed how values may accumulate around spaces on a large scale over the length of a game, and how such valuescapes may be drawn into comparison with each other. Now, I will argue the importance of more minute details in the way values are evoked moving through a space for the first time—how points of interest can form pauses in the flow of gameplay and shape points of reflection. I will return to cognitive research in visual-spatial memory to look at the memory encoding process and reiterate the importance of distinct visual cues. Then, I will argue the manipulation of a player's temporal experience (the alternation between action and reflection) discussed in previous chapters can also be accomplished using the

spatial layout of the game and objects therein. Finally, I will discuss how spatial techniques can deliver the requirements for reflection—the opportunity in a point of reflection, and the presence of value cues to reflect upon—as well as how a game might fail in using these techniques by examining two case studies.

At a basic level, we must acknowledge that time is important to the encoding of visual-spatial memory. The specificity of spatial-temporal context in the research on visual imagery cited above is testament to this fact. The necessity of time also applies to other forms of visual-spatial memory such as cognitive mapping. From this research, I want to move beyond Nitsche's (2008) "story map" concept of cognitive mapping and examine how that cognitive mapping unfolds temporally for the player, as well as what might disrupt or entice such mapping. As Cooper and Lang (1996) observe:

The presentation of information about environments is not only varied, but also is often introduced in a linear fashion. We can learn much about an object in a single glance; however, we generally receive information about an environment over time, while exploring or while listening to a description. In order to form a coherent cognitive representation of a layout under temporally extended conditions of encoding, we must be able to connect and to integrate a series of discrete details about objects and locations (p. 155).

Analysis of game spaces, then, should consider the temporal progression of encoding and what "discrete details" the player has the opportunity to process. With an economy of attention to contend with, the particular layout of game spaces alongside the challenges that populate them may prove crucial to the encoding process (as I shall address in my case studies). For example, a frenzied fight down tight winding corridors with little differentiation and constant challenges may disrupt the player's cognitive mapping more than a slower-paced exploration of distinctive environments with frequent breaks in attention requirements. Ultimately, what is encoded or not

encoded in memory may depend significantly on the player's experience of time and available attention.

Points of conscious reflection—on values or on other memories—may be triggered within game environments by explicitly matching external cues, as noted in the research above, or by prompting the player with other associated cues and encouraging the player to take the time to process them. The latter might be accomplished with a particularly striking POI that arrests the player's action for a moment and/or draws the player to return and examine it after necessary action has ceased. A game might also prompt reflection by building in longer segments of movement through the world without interruption or challenge. I want to return here to Clark's (2014) discussion of the game *Shadow of the Colossus* (briefly mentioned in my first chapter). Clark addresses the long ride between battles across “an area with no towns or points of interest,” which “doesn't involve much strategy or decision-making” (p. 133). In a move diverging from most of the book's focus on active verbs in games, Clark briefly alludes to the significance of these travel segments:

The contrast between battle and travel feels deliberate: riding across the plains is a relaxation in the resistance of the system, an opportunity for the player to set the pace... For some players, this absence of resistance might even offer a chance to pause and reflect, much as transit times often do in the real world, and perhaps to consider the larger questions of the game, like why you are hunting these gigantic, solitary, often peaceful-seeming creatures (p. 134).

Clark is onto something in her mention of this contrast. While *Shadow of the Colossus* is a game of extremes, from frenzied action to slow travel, I argue it is still fruitful to look at the alternation of game pace that other games build with more nuanced patterns in their designs. Any particular location in a videogame may contain both segments of closed focused action and more open, slowed time or pauses. Examining reflection in game spaces will necessitate examining what is

contained in each of these areas and how these settings might be encoding new memories or cuing reflection of particular memories or values already held.

As an open world game with an extremely loose quest structure, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* is an ideal example of how moral reflection can be structured and prompted through game spaces. The game also offers many opportunities to consider spatial techniques separately from the quest structures and character interactions previously discussed. For this case study, I will focus on a location that no quest will specifically direct the player to, which contains no NPCs that can be conversed with or interacted with in an extended manner apart from combat. Nevertheless, this location structures its own moral experience quite apart from these techniques. The location is a cave called Frossel on the northeast coast of Solstheim, a section of the game world added in the final DLC expansion for the game, thus generally encountered after the primary quest line of the original game has advanced significantly.

*Skyrim* is a single-player RPG that can be played in either first or third person perspective (that is, from roughly the point of view of one's avatar, or seeing the avatar represented on the screen). The clunky nature of third person animation in the two previous *Elder Scrolls* games makes this a traditionally first person game to long-time players of the series, and the emphasis on the environment one explores and interacts with is even more present. The game affords more interactions in its environment than many other games, famously allowing one to pick up and carry around even worthless junk if one wishes. In terms of genre, *Skyrim* is a high fantasy game, set in a world of magic, monsters, and medieval-style weaponry, and of course treasure and adventure. It engages the archetype of the traditional powerful hero (or anti-hero), traveling around the world to solve problems and/or get into trouble. Because of the emphasis on exploration, *Skyrim* cultivates in the player an attitude that one can go where one wishes and do

as one wishes. Scholars such as Bogost (2011) would likely argue this game does not lend itself to moral consideration because of the position of power the player's character inhabits and the archetypal nature of many of the conflicts. Even a game such as *Skyrim*, can prompt moral reflection, however.

One particularly striking example of how *Skyrim* uses spatial techniques to provide points of reflection and competing values to reflect on owes its impact to powerful position of the player. The location of this case study, Frossel, is a lair for creatures called rieklings—tribal creatures vaguely goblin-like in appearance that will attack the player if she wanders too close to their lairs but are otherwise minor threats in the world at large. By the time the player encounters rieklings, she is likely of significant power, especially for players who played the game from its initial release, as rieklings are only encountered in DLC that arrived over a year later. They are a threat in numbers, but unlikely to offer a significant challenge. What is significant about the rieklings, and those in this location in particular, is that the player will only encounter them while exploring. While there is one quest that exploring Frossel might help complete, the player has no indication this would be the case and she may complete the quest without exploring this location. The player might also overhear a reaver bandit talking about his hideout in Frossel being taken over and his men killed, but this is not a formal quest. The player is likely to be driven into this icy cave along a northeastern bay of the game world solely by a sort of manifest destiny philosophy of exploration, as the game has thus far encouraged the player to go anywhere and everywhere in search of loot and secrets. During the course of this particular exploration, however, expectations built up over the course of play will be repeatedly turned on their head and there are moments that open up moral engagement and questioning. Frossel accomplishes

these moments largely through the layout of its space and the objects and creatures encountered therein.

No matter how one comes upon Frossel, the empowered urge to explore likely takes him into the cave. Approaching Frossel, one will find a barren and frigid exterior, largely empty except for the corpses of a couple of reavers which suggest to the player some danger may lurk within even if the player arrives here without having heard the story of the reaver hideout being taken over. Reavers are also hostile to the player, and he has likely killed many of them before arriving here. Thus, there will not likely be any sense of vengeance or moral duty to bring whoever murdered these reavers to justice. If the player continues, the motivation is likely simply to see what awaits.

While there are hints from the start that this is not the typical creature lair or bandit cave, the first section of Frossel channels the player fairly quickly into her first combat here. Descending into this ice cave, the first items in the environment to come to the player's attention will be, on the whole, junk. A deer pelt, some animal skulls displayed in a haphazard manner, some stacked pots, barrels and baskets, along with things like leather strips and feathers. This is poor loot indeed, and many players might go past without picking any of it up. A player might reflect at this point on the odd stacks of junk, but she is more likely to continue at a relatively quick pace as the tunnel angles to the right and then opens up onto a large cavern in which some domed tent structures can be seen. Many locations in the game have fairly worthless junk around their entrances, and while those at Frossel may be stacked a bit oddly, a player is unlikely to think anything of it on first encounter. This fact, combined with the cave opening and structures ahead serving as a point of interest, structures the player's experience of time to a quick pace moving forward in anticipation of what lies ahead.

Combat, of course, is a different experience of time than navigation and exploration. Most attention that would go to noting the passage of time is diverted to the challenges and resources to be used in defeating enemies. As the tunnel opens up, the player will note a cluster of tents, small fence-like fortifications, and more stacks of junk, but his eyes will likely be drawn first to the riekings and their large tamed boars called bristlebacks moving around. Upon spotting the player, the riekings will call out in their language (which if the player has subtitles enabled will be translated as gibberish) and attack. The role the environment plays in combat will of course depend on the player's play style, but some of it will be taken into account (a clear view of the room for ranged, a short drop or a ramp up for melee). This combat, for most players should be relatively brief and not too difficult.

After combat is over, there is a period of slowed or stretched out time when the player might reflect more on her surroundings. Both visual and auditory clues signal to the player that she is, for the moment, out of danger. There will be no more red dots pointing towards detected enemies on the compass and the game's background music, which speeds up and becomes more dramatic during combat, will return to its previous ambient levels. Searching the stacks of odd items in and around the tents will again reveal little of value here. Odds and ends—candles, a lantern, some simple gauntlets, more barrels, boxes, and animal skulls—litter the cavern and they are the only real items of note apart from a couple of pens for the boars. This hardly seems to be the hideout of creatures doing much raiding of the surrounding civilization. Through the items found within it, this space begins to signal an environment that is lived in by a community, rather than a seat of threat or power. The items that are here seem more like scavenged cast-offs or simple handcrafted utility, and the riekings have little of value on their person. If the player loots the bodies she will find some riekling spears (which function as arrows for the player) and

maybe a very small amount of gold or other items of little value. This stands in contrast to the more common looting experience, which by this point in the game tends to be more substantial. Here, the macro-level build up of valuescapes over time comes into play with the initial experience of this space, as the associations of similar areas of the wilderness (caves, ruined forts, and other enemy lairs) with powerful and dangerous creatures amassing wealth from the surrounding lands come into contrast with the simple and odd assortment of riekling items.

The pattern repeats itself in the following layout, but the repetition serves a purpose. As I've noted elsewhere, repetition serves to strengthen and reiterate values the player might be attributing to these creatures and this type of environment, while also adding new layers of information and values to the valuescape. The additional piece of information in this case shows these creatures will occasionally ambush the player if he gets close to barrels they are hiding in—they are defensive of their home. Another twisted ice tunnel leads off from the far side of the cavern, also littered with junk. Boxes, barrels, empty wine bottles, lanterns, and shovels are visible down the corridor. The limited visibility might cause many players to slow down, and those who have previously encountered riekling lairs and know that they often hide in barrels to ambush the player may have even more reason to slow nearing the end of the corridor. Another tight turn reveals a similar corridor environment, this one with a tent structure at the end in a much smaller cavern opening than the previous cavern. The low open cavern has a pillar of ice like a stalactite at its center, which also restricts visibility and may draw the player's attention and cause him to slow down. A tripwire triggers a large claw trap here, though it is not especially well hidden, and following this the player may examine two riekling tents that are also full of junk as well as a couple of open and empty treasure chests—reiterating the idea of these creatures as not especially wealthy or powerful. Two rieklings will burst from barrels in ambush



in the corner of this room if the player nears them, transitioning these reflective moments into combat briefly, but they do not pose a challenge. Instead, they serve to alter the player's temporal experience of the space as combat picks up briefly, then returns to navigation and consideration of the environment. The game's environments will typically proceed in this fashion, repetition with minor additions and alterations.

The pattern repeats with another corridor ending in a sharp bend where a barrel, a large kettle, and some other junk are placed. This time there is a riekling in the barrel. In this manner the points of reflection are becoming shorter with more frequent combat interspersed. Immediately thereafter is a larger corridor with more sparsely placed junk and likely visible enemies at the other end. Note that this is a fairly quick transition and preserves the momentum of combat from the ambush to further enemies, and the environment is sprinkled with less items of visual interest between these two spaces. After engaging the rieklings here, the player might notice a little hidden alcove with a barrel and treasure chest in it, for another ambush but little valuable loot. After this, the player is faced with the rest of the corridor—fairly open and empty, though with more junk piled at the far end as it twists again to the right. No ambush waits here, just some gloves and an axe, more random poor loot that will stand out in the player's mind.

The following icy corridor is wider and emptier, clearly opening to a much larger cavern ahead. The contrast of the surrounding white space framing the opening onto the cavern directs and holds the player's attention to the larger reveal of Frossel. The player finds herself on a ledge looking over this new area, her attention already directed by the approach to focus in the center of the cavern. Here, the ice starts to give way to a rockier cavern, much larger than the previous one, with giant pillars of rock supporting it at various points. In the center, a large number of rieklings prostrate themselves, bowing and rising in a clearly religious gesture towards some

structure on another ledge that seems to be some sort of cart as bristleback-mounted riekling rides behind them. The layout of the space combined with the movements of the NPC rieklings stands in stark contrast to anything encountered previously in the cavern, and in some respects the player's previous encounters with most other random enemies in the game. Particularly noteworthy in terms of behavior is that even if the player makes no attempt to be stealthy the worshippers do not immediately turn hostile and move to attack, as normal enemies would at that distance (or even at further distances). All elements of the game—from the layout of the space and the spaces leading up to it, to the placement and movement of NPCs and their triggered responses—cohere to create this point of reflection. The allusion to religious ceremony is clear, if perhaps a bit too blunt. Values the player brings with her from other experiences (even real world experiences) will likely attach some significance to these actions, although the specifics might vary.

Any closer approach or hostile action by the player will result in combat. There are enough rieklings gathered here that for some players these might pose some real challenge. Regardless, combat is likely to be heavier than previous riekling encounters. The pace will quicken once more as the temporal experience of battle kicks in, adapting to its own rhythm of the player's specific combat strategies. Once the combat is over, however, the player will no doubt be drawn back to pursuing understanding of this unique situation they have been prompted to reflect on. In a world full of magical creatures and deities of various kinds, it is intriguing that what the rieklings are worshiping is not one of these powerful beings. Indeed, on inspection the player will discover it to be a meticulously constructed idol of a horse-drawn carriage—an actual carriage and a horse sculpted in ice, with bits of barrels, broom straw, and other scavenged materials (as well as a horse skull) to complete the image and the bridle and saddle. Of course, as

open-ended as the situation is, and as different as player experiences will be, one cannot predict player reactions. Some players may be confused, some amused, some still searching for something they missed. Nevertheless, the game has clearly designed in this space a point of reflection. What form that reflection may take may vary, but the space has been opened. The temporal experience has been structured to allow for and encourage key moments of pause. Numerous conflicting values have been triggered and reiterated through advancing repetitions. These are hostile creatures, occasionally dangerous in ambush or numbers, yet showing no markings of wealth, power, or overly aggressive expansion. They seem, at first, simple creatures, and yet in direct contrast to that they seem to have formed a religion and invested significant effort into it.

My personal response to this point of reflection was a sudden feeling of guilt. I had come to this place largely because all my time playing the game had built in me the sense that I had the right to go anywhere and do anything. Almost anywhere I went in the wilderness I encountered either unintelligent creatures or actively hostile and evil creatures, justifying my intrusion and aggression. Yet here were creatures that, while hostile, were making minimal negative impact on the surrounding environment apart from their immediate surroundings. I had slaughtered the creatures quite easily, and this made me feel even guiltier. Scholars such as Bogost (2011) and Sicart (2009, 2013) are adamant that an ethical perspective in games cannot come from a position of power, yet in this instance it was precisely my position of power that my reflection turned upon. That is to say, this instance made me conscious of that power, and of my somewhat entitled and nigh-sociopathic approach to the game world. Becoming aware of one's own unethical actions is itself an ethical act, as I argued while disputing Bogost's work previously.

Indeed, an ethics of guilt may be something that mainstream games are especially likely to provoke.

### 5.1.3 Counter-example Case Study from *Fallout 4*

Many video games carefully shape the player's experience of time between periods of movement and rest, and many games, especially open world games, utilize points of interest and embed narratives with environmental storytelling. To see the necessity of these elements working in tandem, it is useful to look at an instance where one element is missing—the value cueing points of interest. Another Bethesda game, *Fallout 4*, holds some good examples of failures in evoking this sort of moral reflection. The setting is different than *Skyrim*, as *Fallout 4* is a post-apocalyptic science fiction set hundreds of years after massive nuclear destruction, but the two games share many design elements and level construction techniques. The Corvega Assembly Plant, a stronghold of a gang of raiders in Lexington that the player is likely to find early in the game (with some narrative ties to early quests), offers a good example of such a failure.

The Corvega Assembly plant is packed with embedded narrative in only one sense: inside are terminals that detail a great deal behind the motivations of these raiders, who are the same group as the first raiders the player is likely to encounter in the game. The game manipulates the player's spatio-temporal experience in some similar ways to the *Skyrim* example above, channeling the player through some spaces quickly, taking up the player's attention with intense combat elsewhere, but opening other spaces up with pauses in the flow of action. However, there are few value-laden points of interest in the environment the player may be cued to reflect upon. The player's experience will be different depending on which of two entrances she chooses, though she is most likely to enter through the main building, as the other entrance is hidden in a

sewer pipe some distance away from the large building likely to draw the player's attention across the surrounding landscape. Before even entering, the player is likely to encounter hostile raiders unless she is very stealthy—hostile in actions, but also in the things they will shout during combat. They intend to kill the player and anyone else that crosses their path, something that should be confirmed in the player's previous experiences with raiders.

The patterning of time is not altogether different from the way space manipulates the player's experience of time in the *Skyrim* example. Inside, once combat begins it is likely to be very heavy, perhaps even the most difficult combat the player has faced thus far, as there are many raiders in the main building. This combat should take most of the player's attention, and the temporal experience of this section patterned, as described above in similar examples from *Skyrim*, according to the player's particular rhythms of combat. The only moments of pause will be moments of strategizing or utilizing in-game resources to slow combat time down for tactical purposes. This is not a time for reflection. Afterwards, there will be a similar alternation of slowed down time and combat, as the player navigates narrow dark corridors and the rooms branching off from them while looting containers.

The difference, however, is that the points of interest in the environment do not contain the same value-laden information as in the example above. Corvega is an industrial environment not unlike several of the utility areas the player may already have come across, just on a larger scale. There is little that is expressly unique or drawing the player's interest beyond the same types of containers and terminals he has encountered before. There is some factory machinery, but other than conveying that this was once a factory, there is no moral engagement invited here. At the very top of the factory, you face Jared—the boss of this group of raiders. There is no dialogue, only combat. Ultimately, even in the patterned moments of pause between combats,

nothing in the environment tells a story or gives a player cause to reflect on a broader range of moral questions.

There is a great deal of embedded narrative here, but it comes, as is very common in games of this series, from reading diaries and emails on computer terminals. While these terminals are embedded in the game world and by necessity involve lengthy pauses for reading the material they contain, the values they evoke through text alone have little in the way of visual cues to attach themselves to. In the basement, near the more hidden of the two entrances, is a terminal labeled Lonnie's terminal. It details the adventures of the raiders taking Lexington back from the ghouls and setting up shop here, including such gems as the house Lonnie had his eye on, his efforts at increasing defense and his efforts to curtail his leader, Jared's obsession with chems and the "sight" (visions of the future that some people get). Lonnie's diary does a good job of offering the raider's point of view. Their struggles are, in many ways, the struggles of survivors in a harsh land. Some of them, like Lonnie, are presumably reasonable people trying to make their way in the world, more concerned with defending themselves from the dangers out there than becoming dangers themselves. Of course, I know from my violent experiences with them that these raiders aren't good people, on the whole. Do I mourn in any significant way the killing of a few decent people alongside many bad ones? It makes me think about it, and in that way provokes some moral reflection on my part, but not to the point of drastically changing my actions. The impact is dulled considerably by the fact that the game communicates this clash of values almost exclusively via text. Even if the player were to enter from the hidden entrance and find this terminal early on, she would find very little in the environment thereafter to humanize the raiders, cast them in a softer light, or give a view to a richer detail of their lives (beyond that they eat and sleep). Texts can of course tell powerful stories and involve a great deal of moral

reflection, but in a video game such as *Fallout 4* these brief stories told in texts lack attachment to the visual-spatial world of the game and provide few cultural markers or cues. More importantly, the stories told in these terminals are generally experienced only once with no variation or repetition, none of the unfolding development over time that builds truly complex valuescapes.

The terminals do serve to connect separate narrative threads within the game, but such connections seem forced or unengaging without additional value cues to reinforce or complicate them. At the top level, after killing the boss, there's also a terminal detailing everything from Jared's viewpoint. Apparently, as a child he had met Mama Murphy, one of the individuals who sees the future using chems. Everything she said came true, including that he would become a monster, causing him to devote his life to mastering her power. Narratively, this connects to the player's likely first encounter with raiders fending them off as they are sent to capture Mama Murphy (now an old lady). The notes paint a tragic tale, and give some understanding of Jared's obsession and why he turned out the way he did, seeing his settlement murdered in front of him and being kidnapped by the killers. But everything we know about Jared comes from a couple of terminals and the player isn't granted the opportunity to draw in other value cues in relation to this terminal text. Beyond his bed and this terminal there is again little in the environment or in the player's interactions with Jared as an NPC to humanize him or drive home the clash of values conveyed here in Jared's diary.

The contrast between these two case studies demonstrates that, while many games can use space as a way to alter the pace of action and/or to provide additional narrative information, moral reflection will only occur with value cues embedded in and experienced as part of the game world. The game must provide the player with something, be it a space, item, or character

(as discussed in previous chapters), for valuescapes to form around. A point of reflection proves more powerful if it involves consideration of valuescapes experienced as unfolding in time with repeated triggers in the player's memory, rather than merely being told all at once in text form. What *Skyrim* accomplishes via an unfolding experience of repetition with variations that also draws in comparisons to other valuescapes cannot be affected through a couple of pages of text embedded in an otherwise valueless environment.

In this chapter I have argued that video game spaces, and the objects within them, are key sites for valuescapes to form around. Not only can game spaces evoke values, they can also structure the player's temporal experience of the game such that the alternation between action and reflection can arise from the spaces alone. Valuescapes stemming from quest events and characters certainly aid the full range of moral reflection that takes place in a game, but spatial techniques may also do such work on their own. In making my argument, I have extended current research on values in game spaces by proposing specific ways these values unfold to the player over time and are drawn into comparison with each other. Valuescapes in game spaces can be read at both a macro and a micro level—that is, as they attach themselves more broadly to specific spaces like hubs over a longer arc of gameplay and as they structure points of reflection and draw on similar past experiences to evoke values when moving through a place for the first time. On the macro level, valuescapes can form in response to features of the spaces themselves, but also come to draw on comparison between various different valuescapes in the game, and they grow over the course of play with repeated interaction. On the micro level, the placement of challenges and layouts that channel the player forward lend themselves to action, while more open spaces and distinctive features lend themselves to pause and reflection. Along the way, nuanced valuescapes may form drawing on items found within the environment. Ultimately, such



spaces must be able both to structure pauses of reflection spread out between segments of action and to utilize distinctive value cues within those pauses in order to be successful.

## 6 CONCLUSION

My research carves out a new way of looking at morality in video games—new in holding up mainstream single-player RPGs as objects of study rather than the more prominently studied independent games, and new in calling us to consider aspects of the play experience that have been under-studied or even outright dismissed. Throughout my analysis I make a case for the importance of reflection, of pauses or disruptions, unseating action from its privileged pedestal in game studies. In so doing, I have not merely attempted a reversal of what sits on that pedestal, but rather sought an understanding of the relationship between action states and states of reflection that reveals the role both serve in engaging players. I also demonstrate the significance of time—of the order, frequency, and spacing of narrative, emotional, and ethical encounters as they unfold in a player’s temporal experience.

The picture of ethics in games that I put forth requires that a game structure the player’s experience in particular ways, including in its design both a multiplicity of values to consider and the opportunity to consider them. Furthermore, the game must make such values memorable, giving us sets of values that form, are reified, and occasionally fall into conflict over time as we encounter them repeatedly alongside our daily lives. The opportunities to consider values arise out of the particular patterning of points of reflection as encountered in between the action sequences of gameplay. The values themselves may be conveyed through dialogue, events, and nonverbal cues, yet over the longer course of a game these values require some salient game feature to cohere around. Such a feature might be an NPC, a certain kind of creature, an in-game

organization, a prominent location within the game, or a visually striking item of interest in the game's virtual environment. In any of these cases, the feature will serve as a memory trigger for a valuescape—an ever-shifting map of associated values and how they interact—which players will construct in their minds over the course of the game. Repeat encounters will prompt reflection on this valuescape, sometimes merely to strengthen or add nuance to associations in the player's memory, but sometimes to revise the player's previous interpretations altogether and prompt consideration of qualitatively new associations and/or how the player weighs conflicting values. The most impactful ethical work of games occurs at these more poignant points of reflection, but it could not occur if not for all the other moments that go into building valuescapes over the course of the game.

To understand all these other moments as non-reflective yet also crucial to reflection, I needed to re-examine how various action states are conceived in game studies, especially the most privileged of these action states, flow. Bringing in the original flow research from outside of game studies established the importance of viewing flow in the larger context of other states surrounding it, and the crucial role reflection serves in reaffirming one's identity (which fades from consciousness during flow) and in realizing the self-growth experienced during flow. Reading the interaction of these states through a lens of neo-Piagetian theory then allowed me to push the assertion a step further—to argue flow can operate in service to reflection. This works through perturbations that, in the moments of reflection that follow, can provoke explicit realizations of shifts in norms and knowledge structures and from time to time can even involve radically new associations amongst values and ideas in the most poignant moments of reflection.

The alternation between action and reflection, and the precise arrangement and pacing of those game segments, remains crucial for all my case studies. We saw how moment to moment

within a game this alternation may involve varying lengths of cutscenes and action gameplay in chain quests, as I discuss in Chapter Two, or it may involve the presence or lack of distinctive objects in the environment and points of interest, as I discuss in Chapter Four. In fact, while some games emphasize one or the other, many RPGs utilize both of these methods. *The Witcher 2* may structure the player's experience of time towards points of reflection using cutscenes at times, but it accomplishes the same task elsewhere through striking points of interest encountered as the player wanders the environment, and via the layout of game obstacles in relation to these POIs similar to what I discussed in my *Skyrim* case study.

The same alternation can be seen on a larger scale over the broad course of a game with hubs and wilderness areas. While a game such as *The Witcher 2* or *Dragon Age: Inquisition* involves a number of chain quests at important moments where crucial value conflicts are at play, most of the other quests in the game will take the player back and forth between the hubs and the wilderness. A game like *Skyrim* has few cutscenes and focuses almost entirely on hub and wilderness patterns. Both hubs and wilderness areas involve an unstructured experience of time, in that the order and how long the player spends within are not tightly controlled, but each has a particular relationship with action and reflection. Hubs are generally full of points of reflection and pause, with more subdued action in between in the form of navigation and resource management, while the wilderness rarely strays from action save for the occasional point of reflection most often formed by the layout of the space itself (and occasionally by cutscenes). In my *Dragon Age* case study, the most poignant point of moral reflection I described occurred during a chain quest pattern, yet a large portion of the values that made that moment so emotionally engaging were built up across more freeform play between hub and wilderness throughout the game.

Across all my chapters, I emphasize the importance of pattern repetition, as well as the need to look at not only a single instance but multiple related instances to see how valuescapes are constructed and how especially poignant points of moral reflection occur. The focus on repetition holds whether one is analyzing the pattern of a particular chain quest or considering the relationship of values and references in that chain quest to previous player experiences in the hubs or wilderness. Repetition with expanding variations also proves crucial to understanding the build-up of valuescapes and moral conflict over the broad course of a game, as we saw with the third chapter's Iron Bull case study. When it comes to game spaces, repetition lends hub locations (especially in open world games such as *Skyrim*) much of their narrative, emotional, and moral impact. Finally, as I have just reiterated, repeated patterns of spatial layout within a certain location can serve to take over for the oft-used cutscenes in providing the crucial structure of alternating action and reflection.

My case studies also reveal numerous methods for conveying values, yet all involve the workings of memory and the presence of strong value triggers at points of reflection. The most prominent value triggers I noted were characters and environments, both of which enable valuescapes to grow and change around them through repeated interaction over the course of the game. Due to the ongoing presence of NPC companions, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* relied primarily on characters for the most engaging valuescapes its players might reflect on. Meanwhile, lacking both cutscenes and strong character development, *Skyrim* relied most on spaces for its valuescapes to accrue around. *The Witcher 2* uses both characters and spaces to evoke important valuescapes, though the way the game is split into chapters each set in a different location and emphasizing different characters reduces the reliance on these methods. *The Witcher 2*'s points of reflection work most powerfully off the player's experience of recent

events, but repeated interactions with characters do build valuescapes to a certain extent. The time spent interacting with the location of each chapter also builds a memorable valuescape in the player's mind, as I noted in Chapter Two regarding the gallows in Flotsam—an ever-present reminder of the exchange with the bigoted Loredó, and the conflict of values that the opening to that chapter of the game establishes. In each of these games, we see valuescapes grow through the player's experience of events, characters, and/or spaces. In the more interesting cases I selected for my case studies, we see that especially poignant points of moral reflection, where the true ethical work of games takes place, highlight values that are in conflict—growing from an uneasy coexistence into forcing a dire choice in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, set up to clash in the beginning in a conflict that only widens as the game progresses in *The Witcher 2*, or confronting players with the ethical implications of their own play habits in *Skyrim*.

In terms of the types of values these games encourage us to reflect upon, an interesting common theme invites the questioning of power dynamics and even our own exertion of power through the player character. Other game scholars concerned with ethics such as Bogost and Sicart have turned away from studying these kinds of single-player RPGs precisely because of the position of power such games position the player in. Yet, the value conflicts I've discussed suggest that such games may actually be well-situated to addressing this pressing moral issue of our time. All the games I have discussed include powerful moments of reflection encouraging empathy across perceived racial and cultural differences, veiled in the guise of fantasy settings and fantasy races that nevertheless bear strong similarity to real-world power differentials and colonialism. Beyond this, the game sometimes calls the player to reflect upon their own complicity either in the way they are using their power or the way they benefit from certain patterns of exploitation carried out by other characters and organizations in the game. For

Bogost, reflecting on one's privilege through games requires having that privilege forcibly taken away and being put into a position of powerlessness, as many independent pro-social games such as *Darfur is Dying* tend to do. However, people reflecting on privilege requires more than simply empathizing with those who do not have their privilege in a kind of tourism of identities of difference—it also involves awareness of that privilege even as they are exerting it, being confronted with their complicity in negative impacts of their value systems that may not sit well with them but are nevertheless part of their identity. Generally occurring in fantasy lands far away from the knee-jerk avoidance when confronted with accusations of power exploitation in the real world, these games provide a unique way to reflect upon the issue.

## 6.1 Limitations

The primary limitation of my research was a necessity of my method and subject matter—that analysis must be restricted to my personal experiences of playing through these games. Due to my focus on considering lengthy games in their entirety, securing a range of subjects willing to play these games and take notes on all of their gameplay would be an impossibility. Thus, while emotional and moral impact can be theorized based on the research, it remains subjective in terms of confirmation and detailed analysis. While the cues are there, present and identifiable within the game, response to them may vary. Many players might react to the structure and value cues of the game in a similar manner, but, we must also accept the possibility that some players may even be resistant to any kind of reflection during gameplay.

Despite this limitation, I have modeled a process present within these games not yet acknowledged in current game studies, one that players are likely to encounter and respond to. These games clearly display arrangements of points of reflection throughout, coinciding with key moments of emotional, narrative, and ethical engagement. There are, of course, different types of

players who come to the game for a variety of reasons and may tend to focus on certain aspects of the game world over others. It's quite possible that some players may be more sensitive towards these points of reflection and the context of values than others. Most players, however, would likely be aware of the broad moves of the games in this regard. Regardless of player difference, a poignant crisis moment should still trigger moral reflection, though the richness of this experience and the depth of values reflected upon may not be the same for all players.

Another consideration I must acknowledge is the potential for oppositional readings of certain values. For example, many of the games I analyze here use racism as a negative value, something that might leave the player conflicted about particular characters or organizations. I admit, however, that in all likelihood players of these very games exist who do not recognize these instances as instances of racism, or even refuse to recognize racism as a necessarily negative value. In *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings*, this could lead to a very different response to Loreda, the racist tyrant of a town Geralt finds himself in. The player might recognize other values of Loreda's character in the same way I did, but a shift in interpretation of this one significant value may fundamentally change how that player reflects upon the valuescapes. That is not to say the game may not be successful in prompting the player to reflect on racism in other ways, but such a player would be resistant to the use of racism as a short-hand to signal a character with negative values. Throughout my analysis, I strove to recognize that values stem from various sources. Though the focus of much of the analysis settled on intra-textual valuescapes, and occasionally inter-textual valuescapes drawn from other games of a series or its genre, we must recognize the impact of extra-textual values—the personal values a player brings from previous real-world experience.

The above concerns reveal a broader challenge of analyzing ethics and values in human culture—while often broadly shared, they are not universal. While I selected for my analysis games representing multiple gameplay styles within the genre of single-player RPGs, all of my texts were firmly rooted in Western culture. With the exception of *Fallout 4*, the fictional universe of all the games featured an adapted fantasy of European folklore. With the exception of *The Witcher* series, much of the production of these games involved studios based in the United States or Canada (*The Witcher* comes from a European studio). I would be remiss not to consider that this influence, both the influence of the people making the game and the influence of genre tradition, leads to a certain set of common values being utilized across these texts while other value sets may not be represented. Furthermore, my personal extra-textual values derive from the same culture as all the values presented within these games, and I have a vast knowledge of other similar texts. A player's recognition of values and precise picture of valuescapes might be very different if the player and the game are rooted in different cultures, or if the player has little previous experience with the genre. Of course, most textual analysis presumes a certain level of user knowledge regarding context. Ultimately, interpretation of values may differ, but I would argue that the techniques for structuring the player's experience, prompting reflection, and providing value triggers in the form of NPCs and portions of the virtual space would remain regardless of how culturally situated a player might be.

## **6.2 Future Directions for Research**

While it would not be possible to have multiple subjects play through and take notes on a lengthy RPG, there may be ways of looking at more players' engagement with valuescapes and the process of moral reflection in these games. One method for accomplishing this might be to play through part of a newer game to identify a key point of reflection, then put out a call for



current players of the game and assess how far they have gotten. An open-ended interview or questionnaire regarding a specific point of reflection in the game, but allowing for reflection on previous moments leading up to that point, may partially address the methodological limitations of this kind of analysis. Such empirical research may be useful in answering questions about how differing player types and other demographics impact the response to and engagement with points of reflection. There are numerous challenges to this type of research effectively measuring the same kind of phenomena I've discussed, including timing, finding willing subjects, and subject responses of varying detail. However, it may still prove a worthwhile expansion to the study of moral reflection in various types of players.

I could turn a lens to cultural difference and the impact of genre by repeating this process myself with a game firmly grounded in another culture, a Japanese RPG, for example, or I might expand my research to games of other genres such as action shooters. While I make no claims to the universality of either the values I explore in my analysis or of the particular techniques beyond role-playing games, I propose that some aspects of my analysis should hold up even in these conditions (especially across genre, as the games I selected incorporate multiple play dynamics common in other genres). Future research expanding my objects of study would of course be necessary to confirm that proposal, but my research here has provided enough basis for some hypotheses for certain genres. For instance, action shooter games contain cutscenes in their single-player modes, yet such cutscenes are generally (with the exception of short clips that serve no other purpose than to indicate gameplay goals) spaced much further apart than those in the chain quest patterns I have described. Often these cutscenes are less concerned with building a valuescape and developing conflicting values than with providing motivation and moving the narrative along. Even when such cutscenes gesture towards values, as they often do when

providing the player's diegetic motivation for their upcoming actions, the kind of repetition with growing variation and complexity that produces rich valuescapes over the course of a game is generally absent. One possibility for moral reflection in action games may find its clearest parallel in my Frossel *Skyrim* case study example—an especially striking point of interest (or perhaps even an event) that calls into question the player's own actions in the game up to that point. While, as I noted above, I believe RPGs may be uniquely suited to reflecting on issues of power and complicity, action games may also be capable of doing this using a portion of the same toolset.

Beyond addressing potential limitations and extending my research as noted above, my analysis also led to a number of other potential insights to explore in the future. In my broad argument, I asserted that the two central features in games for triggering values across our temporal experience of a game were non-player characters and the virtual environments. However, at points in my analysis I nod to the role of sound in the game's system of expression, such as how the fading of an intense action score in *Dragon Age* signals the transition from a moment of action to potential points of reflection. I could at least ask, then, what the auditory track might contribute to the alternation of action and reflection more generally. We might also consider whether sound itself can function as a trigger for valuescapes separate from the primarily visual cues I analyze. Certainly, the leitmotifs of stage and film are no stranger to the world of video games either, but we need further research to determine the extent to which game sound might carry values the player might feel called to reflect upon, and whether in that case the sounds could follow the same pattern of repetition, revision, and building conflict that NPCs and game spaces allow for.

In another move, I identified different types of pacing present under the chain quest temporal pattern for *The Witcher 2*. I noted at the time that the list was by no means meant to be exhaustive, just demonstrative of the impact differing arrangements/lengths of action sequences and cutscenes could make, and that leaves an opening for further analysis there. Might it be possible to advance a full typology of the arrangements of these sequences in RPGs? *Dragon Age: Inquisition* also has a number of quests that fall into the chain quest pattern, as do a number of other RPGs such as the *Mass Effect* series. An analysis of only prominent chain quests across several games might give us a better understanding of the full range of possibilities for the role of pacing in games.

Given the dearth of research on the experience of time in media generally, it may be worthwhile to extend my insights on the patterning of time beyond video games. Might an alternation between heightened states and reflective states play a similar role to the emotional and moral impact of other media such as film or television? Do my insights about the importance of our encounters with valuescapes in a game being stretched out over time, encountered at moments spaced throughout players' daily lives offer a new perspective on reading values in these other media? With the extended television series, crossover application of my theory seems especially relevant. Indeed, a fiction TV series is probably the closest counterpart to a lengthy RPG—experienced over a similar amount of time, involving similar patterns of repetition and growing value conflicts, often involving value triggers in the form of characters or significant locations. We could, perhaps, even apply these insights to film series (such as the *Harry Potter* series or the films and supplementary shows of the Marvel Cinematic Universe) though the varying release windows involved may lead to greater differentiation there.

Taking a step to describing time and moral reflection in other media, and then comparing it to the work I've done here, may also more firmly establish the role of interactivity in this process of moral reflection. It may even speak to the importance of interactivity conceptually on a larger scale. Certainly, TV shows and films have periods of heightened activity and other periods that might be more reflective, but these do not quite compare to the state of action (or *interaction*) present in a game. Furthermore, much of my argument has been that the impact of the points of reflection owes a great deal to engagement with the action sequences surrounding it. Would the same process be identifiable in less overtly interactive media, perhaps muted or differentiated in some way? We would need to consider the differences between an active and emotionally engaged viewer and an active and emotionally engaged player.

One type of character I only briefly address (in the second chapter) is the player's character. My theory asserts that NPCs and our ongoing interactions with them are crucial to the formation of valuescapes and their ongoing revision, growth, and conflict. A major reason for this is that NPCs are characters the player interacts with frequently, but whose values and actions are always pre-scripted and usually out of the player's control. The player's character, on the other hand, usually aligns with the player—they are often called avatars because they are the player's representative in the digital world. Yet PCs also have scripted action and dialogue from time to time, even if the player usually picks from a range of choices before it happens. In a game such as *Skyrim*, where the character quite literally has no voice (only text speech and no voice actors with dialogue) and the text options are simple, the will of the character is almost exactly aligned with the will of the player. In other games where the player creates their own character out of a range of options, such as *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the character's background is pre-scripted, and the exact wording of the dialogue choices may vary, but the player still has a

great deal of control over which values the PC holds and expresses—they are still aligned, for the most part. Games like *The Witcher II*, on the other hand, feature pre-made player characters with their own thoughts, feelings, and values in the game world. While a player may control almost all of Geralt's actions, determine Geralt's strategy for navigating combat and the world at large, and influence most of the key decision points, the character of Geralt still asserts itself from time to time. It is quite possible that Geralt's views on a subject matter will be different from the player. These characters sometimes function as the player's avatar, but for brief moments may also be seen as having their own separate valuescape for the player to engage and reflect upon. All player characters may be seen as both self and not-self in the sense that they allow the player to try on different roles within a fantasy world, but a character like Geralt presents an even stronger dichotomy here by placing the not-self further out of the player's control. It would be interesting to explore these kinds of characters further to discover if in some moments they simply operate as NPCs would under my theory, or if the stronger association that comes from being the player's embodiment in the world changes that function to the point I need to expand my theory.

Even in games where the player character is malleable and the game provides the opportunity for trying on different roles (or in some cases active encouragement in the form of replay value by programming a range of responses to different play choices), the player's personal engagement with values remains important. A player role-playing a different set of values than they normally would can never completely escape their personal values, and in these cases moral reflection might still have a real impact on the player's ethics. Personally, I am the type of player that, given the time, enjoys trying different roles and making different choices so that I can see all the possibilities a game allows, yet I often find I cannot completely turn off my

own system of ethics—I can push the boundaries, but I am sometimes surprised that I am unable to go drastically against my values even in the safe play space of a game. The very act of examining the instances where I am able to go against my values and the instances when I cannot serves as a point of moral reflection for me. In a game far removed from the reality I know, I’ve found that I am more able to inhabit characters with evil or abrasive personas. In post-apocalyptic settings such as the *Fallout* universe, where the world is in a dire state with desperate and vulnerable people everywhere, I find myself more troubled adding to the depth of evil already present in the world. These broad genre observations are largely a positive affirmation of my personal ethics, but individual instances prove more challenging. When I am able to affect an evil persona in these games and commit horrible acts against NPCs, I find that I can do so with characters that the game has given me little reason to be emotionally invested in, while I have found myself unable to betray NPCs that the game spends time building more complex valuescapes around (NPCs similar to Iron Bull). This speaks, I think, to the power of the process I have laid forth in this dissertation for emotional and ethical engagement. However, in a way it is an indictment that I am more capable of discarding strangers than those I am personally invested in. That hardly proves to be a unique insight in itself—academically I am aware that phenomenon exists for most people in the real world as well. However, in playing these games I can become aware of myself enacting it, and this can cause me to wonder in what ways (obviously with less dire consequences) I might discount those that life has not given me the opportunity to personally incorporate into my sphere of values.

Given that my current line of research is primarily focused on the structure of these games, where and how they evoke values, most of the values I consider in my argument are values originating in the text itself, even if some values by necessity rely on inter-textual and

extra-textual counterparts for recognition. In the future, I may want to dwell further on the role of values the player carries into the game from outside—from other games or texts, from personal life, from the culture at large. Looking at the values and themes I focus on in my analysis, I cannot help but see some commonalities. The positive values of leadership attached to characters such as Foltest or Iron Bull—bravery, mercy, a loyalty and concern for those under one’s care—strike a very similar note. Themes of standing against racial and cultural persecution are strong across *The Witcher* and *Dragon Age* series, and play no small part in my analysis of *Skryim*.

Many elements of the texts function to evoke these values, but is it possible they stood out as more significant to me due to my own personal values? Or, perhaps, these values might be common within the genre of these texts. The leadership qualities, certainly, might be considered a sort of ongoing shorthand for “good leader” across many fantasy RPG texts, or indeed fantasy fiction in general. The same might be said for allegories of oppression, though in this case I must also ask whether my personal politics played a role in the impact I felt at those moments. We have seen how moral reflection occurs through the patterning of time and the alternation of action and reflection, and how valuescapes form and attach themselves to prominent characters or aspects of the game environment. More remains to be said about the interaction of players’ personal values, and of cultural values in general, with the values emphasized in these games, but knowing where to look for such interactions is a start.

My personal journey toward studying moral reflection in games is one I only explicitly arrived at around the time I began formulating my prospectus for this project. Looking back on work I’ve done and notes I have taken, however, I see this work was building in my mind for much of my academic career. One might say it was a kind of valuescape of its own, building over several smaller points of reflection spread throughout my life towards a poignant point of

reflection that resulted in this dissertation. Since I began working in game studies, the focus on active gameplay elements and the dismissal of everything else never sat right with me. Yet my distaste was not simply borne from a wish to be able to read games as narrative. The fundamental disconnect that I felt was about emotion, about the way games insinuated themselves into my life and the way I pondered their themes and the actions I took within them long after I put down the controller. Many moments from video games that have always stood out the most to me were the moments when I felt the pull to do something that had little impact on meeting the goals of the game. The first inkling of my idea of valuescapes came when I was playing *Fallout 3: New Vegas* and came across a group of criminals that were hung on crosses and clearly in agony. Being unable to get them down from the crosses, I felt compelled to quickly end their torment with headshots. There was no strategy motivation for this act, no goal or quest. In fact, what I accomplished in game terms was a waste of bullets. Yet I felt compelled to end this representation of human misery. Why? From this simple example, I developed a conference presentation (about the time that I was first formulating my ideas for a prospectus) where I considered that I had an ever-growing map of values swirling around in my head—values from the game, values from other similar games, values from my personal life—and that there was something very interesting in the way those valuescapes interacted and were brought into conflict, and how I came to feel and do what I did. With this project, the question soon turned to asking what role, if any, a game played in the construction and manipulation of these valuescapes, and how a game might prompt the player to engage in moral reflection. I feel, now, that I have an answer there. Yet reflection begets more reflection and, just like a newly constructed valuescape, my work remains open to growing complexity and potential conflict far beyond the current point of reflection.





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