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Identity Creation and World-Building Through Discourse in Video Game Narratives

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ABSTRACT

An exploration of how characters develop identity through language use in a video game's narrative, specifically in video games that do not allow for players to make narrative-altering choices. The concept of literacies is used to create a critical framework through which to view video games themselves as a literacy, as well as to view them as a discourse. This thesis analyzes how dialogue is used to develop and showcase gender, sexuality, personality, moral identity in characters in and out of the player's control, as well as how dialogue builds the narrative world in which these characters exist. This thesis includes two case studies, on the *Borderlands* video game series and the *Halo* video game series, approaching each series from a perspective that showcases how its unique world and characters are created through language.

Each series has a specific facet to its narrative that is examined in depth; in the *Borderlands* series, the importance of storytelling to world-building and moral identity, and in the *Halo* series, the significance of speech itself as an act. Additionally, *Destiny* is used as a key supplement to these case studies, as it bridges the gap between the identity-and world-building methods used by *Halo* and *Borderlands*. *Destiny* also incorporates the player's engagement in an online multiplayer universe, creating a unique type of discourse between the player and the game. Finally, as paratexts affect character identity and world-building within each series, the concept of paratexts as they connect to literacy and narrative is thus also examined as an important facet of identity- and world-building.

Keywords: video games, identity, discourse analysis, literacy, paratext

IDENTITY CREATION AND WORLD-BUILDING THROUGH DISCOURSE IN VIDEO
GAME NARRATIVES

by

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1. INTRODUCTION

Video games, as a popular and ever-growing form of entertainment, are known for creating robust story-worlds and characters for players to immerse themselves in. While there are infinite perspectives from which to analyze any story-world, this analysis will be presented from a linguistic perspective. However, a linguistic perspective is still a rather broad category; just as real-life people and situations can be examined from multiple linguistic points of view, so too can video games. Specifically, this analysis will be framed around the following questions:

> How do video games use dialogue and discourse in order to build identities within their story-worlds?
> How do those identities, in turn, build story-worlds themselves?
> How do characters and story-worlds reflect upon the real world, and why does this matter?

In order to address these questions, it is necessary to first define what a video game *is*; that is to say, how a video game may be accessed and understood as a text. Once the "boundaries" of a game's text have been established, the relationship of the player to the text can then be examined – how the player interacts with the text *within* its boundaries as well as *outside* of them, and how these interactions can be categorized and described linguistically. Furthermore, it is important to include the video game universe of discourse as a component of the critical framework through which games as text are accessed. Analyzing the universe of discourse that video games as a whole belong to – a universe of discourse which includes the player – can provide further insight into *how* games are accessed as texts, how they function within their universe of discourse, and how they function in the real world. The definition of a game's text, as well as the exploration of the video game universe of discourse, will help establish a critical framework through which video games can be analyzed linguistically.

Such a critical framework will function as a lens through which interactions *within* a video game can be analyzed. This will allow for examination of how identities function within a

given game world, starting with *how* they can be created, and moving to what *kinds* of identities are created. Furthermore, it is important to examine how these identities function within the story-world, and how they can affect the player's perception of the story-world. Finally, as they are a form of storytelling, video games have social and cultural connection to the realm storytelling as a whole, and as a form of storytelling, they have a social and cultural connection to the real world.

The key component of this critical framework will be the concept of *indexicality* as an intrinsic feature of language in social spaces; specifically, in how it conveys information about the speaker, and what kinds of information it conveys. Indexicality will be examined as one of the primary mechanisms by which identities are built, and by which identities, in turn, build story-worlds in video games. In order to examine how indexicality functions in video games, it is also necessary to examine the player's point of entry into a video game's game world or story-world, as well as *how* this interface between the player and the game allows for linguistic components, such as indexicality, to surface. The framework for analyzing the video game universe of discourse will be established as encompassing the story-world within the video game, the player as they experience the story-world (that is to say, the player as a member of the story-world), and the player as a member of real-world universes of discourse.

It is this final component of the framework that is the most important: because the player is a member of real-world universes of discourse, they themselves are the connection between the game's story-world and the real world. Furthermore, the indexical nature of language reinforces this connection between a story-world and the real world; dialogue is one of the primary ways in which a game can connect with its players, and, through the player, connect with the real world.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study uses examples and direct quotes from the following video games:

Borderlands (Gearbox Software, 2009)
Borderlands 2 (Gearbox Software, 2012)
Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel (2K Australia, 2014)
Destiny (including the *The Taken King* expansion) (Bungie Studios, 2014)
Halo: Combat Evolved (Bungie Studios, 2001)
Halo 2 (Bungie Studios, 2004)
Halo 3 (Bungie Studios, 2007)
Halo 4 (343 Industries, 2012)
Halo 5: Guardians (343 Industries, 2015)

Each of these games were played through to complete the narrative. Screenshots from

Borderlands, Borderlands 2, and *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* were collected through Steam, a

game client by Valve Corporation, both for use as visual aides in this analysis, and in order to

create a record of subtitled spoken dialogue. Any dialogue that was not able to be recorded in

such a way was accessed through fan-curated wiki-style websites, including *Borderlands Wiki,*

Halo Wiki, Halopedia, Destinypedia, and *Destiny.bungie.org*. This information was also

corroborated through recorded videos of gameplay found on YouTube.

3. GAMES AS TEXT

Video games have existed since the 1940s, and a great number of scholars from all

disciplines have interpreted games as text since then. There has, consequently, been much debate

as to *how* video games should be studied and interpreted; most of the debate has been centered

around whether games should be analyzed strictly as a form of narratology, or strictly as a form

of play, or ludology. However, following James Paul Gee in his book *Unified Discourse Analysis* and Henry Jenkins in his essay "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," I firmly believe that a game's narrative and its gameplay are intrinsic to each other, and to separate the two for the purposes of any analysis is the antithesis of what a game *is*.

Not every game has a narrative, and furthermore, not every game with a narrative has one that is Homerically epic. Similarly, not every game has "gameplay" in the archetypal sense of solving a puzzle or controlling a character. For example, "motion comic"-type games consist of minimal "gameplay" and *do* contain Homerically epic narratives, while puzzle games such as *Tetris* are pure gameplay with no narrative. One of the core principles of game design is that if a narrative is present, *it cannot be developed separately from gameplay mechanics*; however, a game with a narrative cannot have this narrative utterly ignored by the gameplay. (Bryant & Giglio 2015:55-59) However, this is not to say that games without narratives are in any way 'lesser' or undeserving of analysis; they are simply, by virtue of what they are, not suited for narrative analysis. What every video game has in common, regardless of game genre, story genre, or narrative presence, is an objective, a way for a player to complete this objective, and the necessity for player input – and within these is where a narrative can be found, as well as a discourse between the player and the game. (Bryant & Giglio 2015:55-59)

3.1 TYPES OF GAMES, TYPES OF NARRATIVES

Game development is an expansive industry wherein programmers, engineers, producers, artists, performers, and writers make their careers. Games are as diverse in content as films, television shows, or novels, and the aforementioned creative endeavors often face the similar challenges in design and production as well as publishing. The Entertainment Software Rating

Board functions similarly to the Motion Picture Association of America in that it restricts not only the language that can be used in a video game but also the narrative themes. For example, a game rated for all ages may contain cartoon violence, but only a game rated for ages 17 and up may contain graphic violence and strong language. Just like in the film industry, a game developer might try to intentionally limit the violence, suggestiveness, or strong language in their game in order for it to reach a wider audience.

Again, just like with films, television shows, novels, plays, and other "narrative vehicles," there is an enormous variety in the type of story video games tell, from science fiction and fantasy, to horror and action. However, unlike the aforementioned "narrative vehicles," video games also have enormous variety in how they are played: third-person role-playing games, top-down dungeon crawlers, and shooters from the first- and third-person perspective, to name a few. Bryant & Giglio (2015) make a distinction between game genre and story genre for video games; types of gameplay are just as varied as types of narratives. (Bryant & Giglio 2015:46-47) As player interaction is obviously key to a video game experience, gameplay comes together along with a description of narrative genre to create labels that describe not only what genre of story a game will tell, but also how that game will be played.

For example, a science fiction first-person shooter (FPS) will most likely be set in the future, as is most science fiction, and as a first-person shooter, the player will control their character from a first-person perspective, wield a variety of guns, and move through the story-world via a series of battles. Role-playing games, or RPGs, are another highly popular genre, and an important component of most role-playing games is the ability to create a character and to "choose your own adventure." Blockbuster RPGs such as Bethesda Softworks' *Fallout* series and BioWare's *Dragon Age* series tend to lack a protagonist with a predetermined personality;

instead, the player's character is just "the Courier" or "the Warden," for example, and the player is allowed to customize their player character themselves, from physical appearance to personality. Games like these almost always have an extensive character creation system where a player can choose their character's appearance, and they also tend to have a very extensive system of dialogue choices. In effect, a role-playing game allows the player to develop a unique character and their narrative from the ground up, and then place that character in the larger story-world of the game. However, there are games that combine elements of multiple story and game genres; *Destiny* (Bungie Studios, 2014) is a first-person shooter with role-play elements as well as a sci-fi game with fantasy elements.

Video games clearly are not an archetypal form of text, as they are not a purely written medium. A game's "text" is comprised of its narrative, however developed or present it may be, and everything related to this narrative. However, unlike film or television – similarly "non-archetypal" texts that are visual media – a game's narrative cannot be separated from the game mechanics, because the mechanics *are* the way in which the player experiences the game and, by extension, the narrative. As noted, a video game can exist without a narrative (e.g., puzzle games such as *Bejeweled* from PopCap Games and *Tetris,* originally created by Alexey Pajitnov), but a game, by definition, cannot exist without mechanics, because it would lack a method of player input. (Bryant & Giglio 2015:55-59) Therefore, a definition of a video game's "text" must include not only its narrative (whether present or not), but also the means by which this text is accessed, or "read."

3.2 PARATEXT

The concept of paratext can be used to help further refine what a game's text is comprised of. Paratext is defined as supplementary material to the main text, a term originally coined by Gérard Genette. (Genette 1987:1-5) For a novel, the main text is easy to discern. The paratext might include the cover art, any introductions or closing remarks, or even the title and title page. Furthermore, Genette creates a distinction between peritext and epitext. Peritext is comprised of "the extra texts or bits of text or physical features that are physically appended to the main text," and epitext is comprised of "elements that stand outside the physical boundaries of the main text, but also shape its reception and interpretation." (Jones 2008:25)

Clearly, these definitions must be amended in order to apply them to a video game, especially where peritext and epitext are concerned. Using the broad definition of paratext as a whole, the main text of a video game would therefore be the game itself – whether on a disc or digitally downloaded – and the paratext would include the cover art, the instruction booklet, any marketing, tie-in novels, interviews with the developers, and the like. However, the distinction between peritext and epitext is somewhat harder to draw, because it depends on what is considered to be the main text of the game. Broadly, the main text of the game can be considered everything that can be done as a player; that is to say, everything that can be accessed while controlling the player character and navigating the game world. The peritext would therefore be things such as the main menu, the settings menu, and start screen, for example. A narrower definition of main text can also be made, however, if the main text is taken to be *only* that which is obligatory to completing the "main story" of the game. This would relegate to peritext not only the start screen and any player menus, but also anything that is technically optional, such as sidequests or collectible items.

Furthermore, as technology advances, devices are being more and more commonly engineered and programmed to support compatibility and communication across platforms. Many popular video games now have databases and guides available online, both official and fan-made, which can be categorized as paratext, yet the distinction between peritext and epitext is starting to blur even here. In *Destiny*, for example, a player earns "cards" while playing the game, which are only accessible through the online portal or through the *Destiny* phone app. These cards make up the game's Grimoire, a collection of stories, legends, and information from within the story-world. It can be considered peritext, as it is something that is programmed into the game and that a player must first unlock through gameplay, but the content of the Grimoire is only accessible *outside* of the game itself.

Regardless of where the distinction between peritext and epitext is made, paratext as a whole remains an important component of a video game's text, and can (and often does) inform the player's experience. As Jones says,

> [...] The fact that mere action-based, story-innocent gameplay seems to be fairly widespread doesn't diminish the importance of the universe-building going on behind the scenes or at the margins of any given casual night of shooting at aliens (or at your friends playing as aliens).
> (Jones 2008:82)

Additionally, from Bourgonjon:
> [...] paratexts offer ample opportunity for creating identity [...] because paratexts often appear on the internet where they have the potential to reach a variety of different audiences around the globe, the resulting identities are multiple. **In addition, the notion of paratexts connects video game literacy practices to traditional and other forms of literacy.** [...] Video game literacy comprises 'intertextual navigation, comparison, and reading of the 'official' and 'unofficial' paratexts, and contextualizing the information contained in light of the credibility of the particular sources.'" *(emphasis mine)*
> (Bourgonjon 2014)

As Bourgonjon notes, paratexts allow for additional components of literacy to surface. These literacies are highly intertextual; paratexts, as mentioned, can range from tie-in novels to online databases to articles and interviews, each requiring their own literacy components. However, as Jones says, regardless of how much importance an individual player may place on a piece of paratext (or paratext as a whole), paratext is just as vital a component of a game's story-world as the game itself. The lines between text and paratext, and between epitext and peritext, are not so much important as the way they interact, and how they contribute to the larger discourse between the player and the game.

3.3 LITERACY

Video games are not a narrative medium accessible to everyone the way that oral storytelling is. Video games are expensive, and they require expensive accessories as well as the luxury of free time. Every video game requires a platform on which to be played, and these platforms range from arcades to specialized consoles (e.g., Xbox One, Playstation 4, Wii U) to personal computers (high-end gaming machines and small netbooks alike) to handheld consoles and smartphones. Each platform is navigated in its own unique way. Furthermore, there is an enormous variety in *types* of video games; each of the different story genres and game genres outlined previously require very different things from a player.

There are also a number of highly negative stereotypes surrounding video games and gamer culture; most prominently, that video games are "only for boys," and that the average gamer is a teenage male. As far as the actual population demographics of gamers are concerned, the numbers disprove the stereotypes with absolute certainty: the average gamer is 35 years old, women of all ages make up 44% of the gamer population, and adult women (i.e., women over

18) make up 33% of the gamer population. (ESRB, 2015) Additionally, as is the case with any subculture, a gamer must learn to navigate gamer culture in a way that suits their needs and comfort. Therefore, it can be said that gamers must know how to navigate not only games themselves, but also the larger sphere of gamer culture.

In light of the above, it can be said that video games require a certain type of knowledge to play, and that this knowledge, along with time and money, become a part of the literacy that is required for video games. The definition of "literacy" can be – and almost always is, in discussions of critical literacy – expanded to include much more than just knowledge of reading and writing. Bourgonjon (2014) suggests a tripartite model of video game literacy, made up of *operational*, *critical*, and *cultural* literacies that work together to inform a player's experiences within a video game, within the larger culture of gaming, and within the even larger matrix culture. Operational literacy includes the time, money, console(s), and skills required; critical and cultural literacies are what create the connection between the player and the game. Bourgonjon highlights the need for a critical dimension of video game literacy, and notes that "[scholars'] calls for video game literacy are grounded in the observation that video games are not traditional text forms, serve as important frames of reference for young people, and require informed decision-making in the context of culture, education, family, and policy."

Literacy hinges on the ability to receive input, analyze that input, and create some sort of output (or otherwise react). In this sense, literacy is very similar to a conversation or discourse, as conversations also hinge on the cycle of input-analysis-output. Indeed, there is a component of literacy to conversation as well – namely, the ability to take social cues, to respond appropriately, to ask appropriate questions, and so on. Just as conversational literacy is dependent on the matrix culture (e.g., politeness, turn-taking, honorifics, etc.), gaming literacy is dependent on familiarity

with the matrix *gamer* culture, as Bourgonjon notes with the cultural literacy component. A player must be able to recognize what *type* of game they are to be playing, and with that recognition, they must also be able to be "genre-savvy" and know what to expect out of a given genre. To use *Destiny* as an example again, a given player must go into this game expecting science fiction elements (e.g., space exploration), common first-person shooter mechanics (e.g., a button to jump, a button to fire a weapon, how to move in the first-person perspective), and elements common to role-play games such as class selection, which involves a level of self-awareness such that a player knows *how* they like to play their games (i.e., their preferred play-style).

A player with a preferred play style can be said to have a high degree of literacy in gaming. Play style is unique in that it is both genre-specific and genre-transcendent. Broadly, the type of gameplay expected in a certain video game is determined by its game genre, but within that game genre, a player may have a certain style of gameplay that they prefer. Furthermore, this preferred play style – such as long-range combat, for example – may carry over across genres, from a first-person shooter to a role-playing game. A player with a preferred play style is operationally literate, as they have played enough games to know what it is that they prefer; they are critically literate, as they are capable of discerning what option or options in a game can give them what they want; and they are culturally literate, as they are capable of seeking out the kinds of games that offer the play-styles they prefer, as well as the genres and narratives that they prefer.

Take, for example, a player who knows that they prefer shooters or role-playing games, and that they prefer ranged attacks rather than close-quarters combat. In games with class selection they will choose those classes which offer bonuses for long-range combat, such as

"assassin" or "sniper," and in games without class selection but with weapon selection, they will choose long-range weapons such as sniper rifles or longbows. In order to play a game as successfully as possible, a player must be *operationally* competent in playing the game; they must be *critically* competent in selecting the options that allow them to competently operate the game; and they must be *culturally* competent in order to seek, select, and play those games which can offer them something in which they are interested.

4. CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN THE PLAYER AND THE GAME

Player experience is a sum of many things, and it hinges primarily on *interaction*: interaction with the game world via game mechanics, interaction with non-player characters (NPCs) as part of the game world, and interaction with other players via and within the same game world (i.e., games with a multiplayer component). As Gee argues in *Unified Discourse Analysis*,

> [...]Video games do communicate. Furthermore, they are a turn-taking form. The player acts and the game responds. They involve a turn-taking, real-time, responsive and reciprocal conversation [...] they are, perhaps, open to analysis as a conversational, discursive form of communication and collaborative meaning making.
> (Gee 2015:10)

Each game/player interaction contributes to the discourse model, or universe of discourse, that gaming itself constitutes, the same way that novels, film, or poetry constitute a universe of discourse. Furthermore, within the larger gaming universe of discourse, each game constitutes its own universe of discourse. Just as a Jane Austen novel is not read or experienced the same way a Harry Potter book is read or experienced, no two games have identical universes of discourse. While each game fits into the larger sphere of the general gaming universe of

discourse, genres (both story and gaming genres) are also their own unique universe of discourse, with individual games fitting into those as well. These nesting universes of discourse reach from those contained within the story world (i.e., the universes of discourse present for the characters within the games) to the broader genre universe of discourse, to the gaming universe of discourse, to the nearly infinite universes of discourse present within society at large.

4.1. A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

Though discourse is usually defined as a mode of communication between two or more people, video games also constitute a discourse. This is somewhat similar to how the field of linguistics, as a whole, would constitute a discourse; it is its own subject matter, with its own particular "rules" of content, its own specific jargon, and it creates a unique manner and perspective through which people communicate. However, a distinction must be made between the discourse that is shared among players of video games, and the discourse that video games facilitate *between the player and the game*. Because video games necessitate input from the player and also simultaneously create an output *back* to the player, the resulting feedback loop is *communicative* in nature, as discussed with regards to literacy. Furthermore, with advances in technology, games have placed more and more emphasis on communicating verbally to the player, both through text (e.g., instructions to the player, in-game information and dialogue, etc.) and through characters portrayed by voice actors.

A conversation occurs at the point where the speaker's and hearer's efforts meet, regardless of how much effort is being put in by either party, and within the video game discourse model, this "conversation" ends up being the gameplay itself. As Gee (2015:85) states, "game play is a matter of a conversation between a player and a game world." The gameplay

itself exists at the space between a player's input and analysis of the game, and the game's input

and analysis of the player – specifically, the actions and choices a player makes with the "tools"

they are given in a video game. These "tools" can be as simple as choosing a dialogue option or

as complex as aiming a crosshair precisely at the one-pixel-wide critical hit spot on an enemy;

this mirrors "normal" conversations where the tools can range from a phoneme to a complex

grammatical structure.

Pragmatics, as a field dedicated to understanding and describing conversational functions

and conventions, has formalized a series of basic conventions, known as Grice's Conversational

Maxims and the Cooperative Principle. While there have been several alternatives proposed to

these Maxims for various reasons, such as Horn's Q- and R-implicature and Levison's Q-, I-, and

M-implicature, Grice's original Maxims function well as a description of what creates a

successful conversation. (Horn 1984; Levison 2000)

> **Cooperative Principle:** Make your conversational contribution such as is
> required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of
> the talk exchange in which you are engaged; that is to say, be *pragmatically
> cooperative*.
> **Maxim of Quantity:** Say enough, but not too much.
> **Maxim of Quality:** Say only what you have reason to believe is true.
> **Maxim of Relation:** Say only what is relevant.
> **Maxim of Manner:** Be brief, clear, and unambiguous.
> (Birner 2013)

These maxims have four states: they can be observed, violated, flouted, or opted out of.

Observing and violating a maxim are clear cases; the maxim's "instructions" are either followed,

or they are not. Violating a maxim is done so that the hearer is not aware of the violation.

Flouting a maxim entails a state where the maxim is violated, but in such a way that the hearer *is*

aware that the maxim is intentionally being violated, and that the speaker is nonetheless being

pragmatically cooperative. Opting out of a maxim is simply the refusal to participate in what it

entails, and indeed, it is essentially the refusal to participate cooperatively in a conversation.

If gaming can be considered a conversation between the player and the game, then it

would follow that Grice's Conversational Maxims would be able to apply to gaming itself. For

example, one of the most fundamental interactions between a game and its player comes in the

form of instructions and commands; the first thing a player experiences in a video game is almost

always a command: to perform an action to start the game. An example of this is shown below.

Fig. 1 – The start screen for *Borderlands 2* for the PC.

The above start screen contains two things: the logo of the game, *Borderlands 2* (Gearbox Software, 2012), and a command to the player to "press any key." This "utterance" observes each of the Gricean maxims: the game "says enough" without saying too much, it is relevant (it is an action needed to start the game), and it is clear and unambiguous. The only maxim which is difficult to apply to this situation is the Maxim of Quality, since the question of whether machines can lie is more a philosophical one than a pragmatic one; it can be assumed that, insofar as the game's software and programming is concerned, it is never lying to the player[1]. Instructions from a video game that observe the Gricean maxims will create a better player experience, just as conversations that observe the Gricean maxims will, at the very least, create a coherent conversational experience.

By contrast, unclear instructions can make a game utterly unplayable. Just as one person giving another unclear instruction is a violation of the Maxim of Manner (at the very least), so too are unclear instructions from a video game. However, there are certain cases of unclear instructions that seem to flout the Gricean maxims (again, at the very least the Maxim of Manner, if not others) rather than violate them outright. However, in the following example from *Dark Souls: Prepare To Die Edition* (FromSoftware, 2012), it becomes clear that even flouting may not appropriately describe such cases.

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[1] Though, of course, whether the narrative (or a specific character within the game) lies to a player is an entirely different matter.

Fig. 2 – A screenshot of *Dark Souls: Prepare To Die Edition*, for the PC.

Here, the player is instructed to hit the "A button" in order to read the message. At first glance, this may not seem to be an unduly unclear command; this is a game on the PC, and there is an "A button" on a PC keyboard, usually located between "S" and "caps lock." However, the interpretation of this command is greatly complicated once "common ground" knowledge is factored into how the player-as-hearer interprets the game's "utterance."

On a video game console, such as the Xbox One or Playstation 4, players use the controller to interact with the game; the controller for both systems has two thumbsticks, a D-pad with four arrows in cardinal directions, and a set of four buttons, one of which is "A" on the Xbox controller.

Fig. 3, left – an Xbox 360 controller.
Fig. 4, right – a Playstation 4 controller.

By contrast, PC games make use of a keyboard and a mouse. Where a console game would use

one of the thumbsticks to move the character around the world and the other to "look around,"

that same game on the PC would use the W,A,S,D keys to move and the mouse to "look"; this is

the standard.

Fig. 5 – A screenshot from *Borderlands 2* for the PC.

In the above *Borderlands 2* screenshot, the player has the option to press the E key in order to

talk to a character; this, along with using the spacebar for jumping and R for reloading a weapon

is also standard.

If a player goes into the game *Dark Souls* (Fig. 2) with only the knowledge of how PC

game controls work, then the player would logically hit the A key with the intention of reading

the message, and instead find their character moving to the left. This would be a clear-cut case of

bad instructions and a violation of the maxim of Manner. However, someone with the "common

ground" knowledge outlined above would know, first, that hitting the A key would only move

their character to the left and therefore *not* read the message; second, that the image of an A

inside a green circle corresponds to the A button on an Xbox controller (fig. 3); third, that the A button on an Xbox controller is usually used for interacting with the game world; fourth, that the game is asking the player to press a key in order to interact with the game world; fifth, that that key, as seen in Fig. 5, is usually E; and finally, the player would arrive at the conclusion that they should (at least try to) press E in order to read the message.[2]

This is where the difference between flouting and violating a maxim becomes rather murky. The hearer does indeed understand that the maxim in question (here, most likely Manner or Relation) is being violated, but the definition of flouting requires that the speaker be violating the maxim so that the hearer is aware of the violation, which is not the case in this situation. This is also not a violation, however, since a violation, by definition, is done with the intention of the hearer being unaware of the violation (e.g., lying as opposed to telling the truth). This is further complicated by the fact that violation, flouting, and opting out must be done *intentionally*, and it would not seem that the game is intentionally giving bad instructions.

The above breakdown is very similar to Searle's 10-step process of calculation of speech acts. A speech act is an utterance which performs some act, which can range from a request or command to things such as naming, apologizing, or condemning. Speech acts can be direct ("I command you to sit down," where the speaker directly and explicitly commands the hearer), or indirect ("It's pretty chilly in here, is the heater on?", implying that the speaker wants the heat to be turned on). Direct speech acts express their literal meanings; a command such as "I command you to sit down" has no "unspoken" meaning. Indirect speech acts have meanings other than

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[2] *Dark Souls* was originally released for the Xbox 360 and Playstation 3 in 2011, and the PC version was released a year later. However, the game was simply "ported" from the consoles to the PC (rather than rebuilt and re-coded for the PC) with little changes to its coding other than what was necessary for it run on a PC, resulting in comparatively atrocious graphics along with glitches like the interaction prompt in Figure 2.

what is said literally, and Searle's process shows *how* a hearer (subconsciously) infers this

"unspoken" meaning. (Adapted from Birner 2013:245-246; cf. Searle 1975)

> *Student X:* Let's go to the movies tonight.
> *Student Y:* I have to study for an exam.
>
> **Step 1, facts about the conversation:** X has made a proposal, and Y has responded with a statement that he has to study for an exam.
> **Step 2, Cooperative Principle:** X assumes Y is cooperating and that his remark is intended to be relevant.
> **Step 3, theory of speech acts:** A relevant response must be an acceptance, rejection, counterproposal, etc.
> **Step 4, inference from 1 and 3:** His literal utterance was none of these, hence was irrelevant.
> **Step 5, inference from 2 and 4:** Therefore, his illocutionary point differs from his literal one.
> **Step 6, shared knowledge:** Studying for an exam takes a large amount of time, as does going to the movies.
> **Step 7, inference from 6:** Therefore, he probably cannot do both in one evening.
> **Step 8, theory of speech acts:** A preparatory condition on the acceptance of a proposal is the ability to perform the act.
> **Step 9, inference from 1, 7, and 8:** Therefore, what he has said has the consequence that he probably cannot accept the proposal.
> **Step 10, inference from 5 and 9:** Therefore, his primary illocutionary point is probably to reject the proposal.

To outline the "conversation" in Figure 2 as Searle does, with some adaptations:

> **Step 1, facts about the conversation:** The game is giving me instructions.
> **Step 2, Cooperative Principle:** I assume that this instruction is relevant to my gameplay experience.
> **Step 3, theory of speech acts (?), "theory of gaming" (?):** A relevant instruction is given in such a way that I am able to follow it with the controls I have via my keyboard and mouse.
> **Step 4, Inference from 1 and 3:** The literal instruction is not given in such a way that I am able to follow it with the controls I have via my keyboard and mouse, and is therefore irrelevant.
> **Step 5, inference from 2 and 4:** Therefore, the "illocutionary point" the game is making is different from the instruction that is literally given.

Step 6, shared knowledge: The green A button logo is what appears on Xbox 360 games, and this button is used to interact with the game world.

Step 7, inference from 6: The game probably wants me to press a button to interact with the game world.

Step 8, theory of speech acts (?), "theory of gaming" (?), shared knowledge (?): The E button is often used in PC games to interact with the game world.

Step 9, inference from 1, 7, and 8: Therefore, the game is telling me to press the Xbox 360 green A button, when instead it means for me to press the corresponding action button on my keyboard.

Step 10, inference from 5 and 9: I should press E to read the message.

Steps 3 and 8 are particularly problematic. Normally, these steps outline what a speech act is supposed to convey; as the utterance in question is a command, that would make it a speech act with its own rules, but in this situation, its nature as a command *within a video game* is more important than its nature simply as a command. The instructions shown in Figure 2 *are* a speech act, though a not-entirely-felicitous one. Perhaps it would be better to classify the above situation as such a not-entirely-felicitous speech act, rather than a case of a not-quite-flouted, not-quite-violated maxim or maxims. Furthermore, categorizing this type of "glitch" as a direct or indirect speech act is also difficult because it is by nature a direct speech act (i.e., it *is*, at its base, a command), but because it is a "glitched" command, it must be interpreted in the same way as an indirect speech act. Therefore, rules such as the theory of speech acts (or the placeholder "theory of gaming") may not be applicable or relevant, either.

In a video game, as in other discourses, the "common ground" knowledge makes up a crucial component of the context (or rather, discourse model) in which any given utterance should be understood. This shared knowledge consists not only of what was briefly outlined earlier with regards to controllers, but also with regards to video game literacy; in fact, shared knowledge as generally defined by the study of pragmatics *is* video game literacy, in the most general sense. Shared knowledge also covers a rather interesting aspect: that the player is almost

always communicating with the game via an avatar. There are certainly exceptions, namely

"god-mode" games where the player controls an entire world (*The Sims* Maxis, 2000; *Roller*

Coaster Tycoon, Chris Sawyer Productions, 1999; *Civilization*, MPS Labs, 1991*)* or puzzle

games (*Peggle,* PopCap Games, 2007; *Bejeweled, Tetris*), but today's bestsellers tend to be

games where the player controls a character (specifically known as the "player character") and

experiences the game "through the eyes" of the player character. In games with a first-person

perspective, this is quite literal, as the player will usually just see the player character's hands; in

a game with third-person perspective, the player may see all or almost all of the player character

as they're controlled.

Regardless of visual perspective, it is exceedingly rare for in-game dialogue to be spoken

directly to the player. Instead, in almost every game where the player is represented by an avatar,

in-game dialogue is spoken to the *player character*, rather than directly to the player. The

dialogue may be instructions (to pursue or complete a quest), information (about the story-

world), or something else, but conversations between a player character and a non-player

character tend to *not* address the player directly, but rather the player character.

> ***Cayde-6:*** All right... I'd like to tell you the strength of the City is behind you, but
> as long as the Dreadnaught is still firing, we can't risk reinforcements. Head
> inside, see if you can find whatever's powering that weapon.

In this quote, a non-player character in *Destiny: The Taken King* is giving the player character a

set of instructions. This is essentially a conversation between Cayde-6 and the player character,

and yet the player will always assume that the instructions were given to *them*, and will follow

those instructions as if they were delivered to the player themselves. Video games as an

interactive medium hinge upon the player interpreting any conversation their avatar has as a

conversation that is meant to include the player, rather than the avatar. Functionally, the player

and their avatar are a one-person unit as far as the discourse model is concerned.

> **Handsome Jack:** I know you think I'm a monster. You think I enslaved Angel.
> But you didn't see what she did to her mother. I had to restrain Angel's power.
> You get that? I had to.
> **Lilith:** And I'm sure he had to exploit her for profit and power, too. Don't listen,
> Vault Hunter – he killed Angel long before you pulled the plug– *(interrupted)*

In dialogue like the above, from *Borderlands 2*, the player is meant to interpret the dialogue here

as something that is being spoken *to the player*, regardless of the fact that Lilith specifies (for

herself and for Jack) that she is speaking to the Vault Hunter.

This is part of how video games, as a discourse, function; they necessitate a specific

method of input from the player, and also give a specific type of input *to* the player in such a way

that in order for each utterance to be felicitous, the player *must* know that anything spoken to the

player character is also a message to the player themselves. Speech acts in a game can range

from direct commands from a non-player character, such as "head inside," to indirect speech acts

(i.e., indirect commands) such as the following, also from *Borderlands 2*:

> **Sir Hammerlock:** Science demands I forgive [an enemy monster]. Vengeance
> demands I kill it. Today, my friend, you will be my vengeance.

Therefore, it can be said that all speech acts – or rather, all dialogue – must be calculated by the

player in such a way that factors in the "filter" of the avatar. *Borderlands 2* also toys with this

idea in the following quote, spoken at the end of a mission early in the game:

> **Claptrap:** Even though you didn't bring me what I asked for, I've decided to let
> you use that stash to share weapons between my minions! Specifically the ones
> that, uh, that you control. *(beat, lowers voice)* Look, it's for twinking items
> between your characters.

Here, Claptrap begins speaking to the player character, but then *directly addresses the player*, giving them information pertaining specifically to gameplay[3].

This is directly representative of a duality in the way in which a player must interpret instructions as speech acts; in one regard, the player must know to interpret anything spoken to their avatar as something spoken to the player themselves, and in another, the player must know that the game will also sometimes give instructions directly to the player (and in the Claptrap quote, this line is intentionally crossed). This seems to create a situation in which the player *must* acquire this common-ground knowledge before playing a video game. Games are an interactive medium; this is shared knowledge. However, could the details used in Searle's 10-step method be considered common knowledge? To certain members of the discourse, perhaps, but if so, then it may not count as truly common knowledge.

Furthermore, what *does* count as "common ground," in this case? Is it simply the knowledge of a certain standard that video games adhere to? If that is the case, then the enormous variety in video games leave only one thing as common ground: interactivity. If common ground is acquired, rather than assumed, then is it truly common ground, or is it skill acquisition? If a video game is based on skill acquisition, then can pragmatic rules and theories truly be applied to effect? In this sense, video games toe the line between being a discourse, to which the rules of discourse and conversation apply, and being a literacy, with levels of skill and analysis that are required in order to "fully" participate. Pragmatic rules and theories can absolutely be applied to the game's narrative (insofar as there is dialogue to which it may apply), but they cannot be applied as cleanly to the rather nebulous conversational space between the player themselves and the game itself.

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[3] Of the games named thus far *Borderlands* is without a doubt the most satirical; the series is well-known for its tongue-in-cheek humor, and often reaches towards (or breaks) the fourth wall.

This "common ground" information can therefore be posited as being not necessarily pragmatic in nature, but rather *social*. To return to Bourgonjon's tripartite model of literacy, information such as "when this non-player character says 'you' to the player character, it must be interpreted as referring to the player" is part of the *cultural* literacy, or social knowledge, that a player must have when playing a game. Furthermore, a player must be able to recognize when a game is toying with this concept, as in the *Borderlands 2* example, or when a game truly is speaking directly to the player, as with commands; this would, therefore, also be merging into Bourgonjon's concept of critical literacy, requiring a player to have the critical skills necessary to make these distinctions. Critical literacy would, again, be key in knowing how to interpret not-quite-correct instructions, as with the *Dark Souls* example. While pragmatic rules and theories can be applied to gameplay – as the conversation between the player and the game – a literacy model can provide a more inclusive analysis, as it incorporates not only the linguistic and quasi-linguistic aspects of gaming, but also the social aspects.

4.2 A UNIVERSE OF DISCOURSE

> Discourses are ways of thinking, believing, valuing, acting, interacting, dressing, gesturing, and using objects, tools, technologies, places, spaces, and times to enact or pull off a socially recognizable identity or avatar. [Discourses] begin and end in history, change and transform as they live, and their interactions with each other across time and space constitute history and society. They need us to carry them through space and time, just as video games need players.
> (Gee 2015:107)

The driving force behind any universe of discourse – or any discourse, or any conversation – is, of course, language, and language is, fundamentally, a social practice. Any given utterance carries literal meaning (that is to say, a fundamental "dictionary" meaning, in the

absence of context), but language is much *more* than just literal meaning, as evidenced most prominently by the existence of fields such as pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology. For the purposes of this thesis and its analyses, the most important aspect of language as a whole is its *indexical* nature. The concept of indexicality (Silverstein 1976; cf. Ahearn 2011:25-30) is defined thusly by Alessandro Duranti:

> To say that words are indexically related to some "object" or aspect of the world out there means to recognize that words carry with them a power that goes beyond the description and identification of people, objects, properties, and events.

Any given utterance carries not only literal meaning but contextual meaning as well; however, this particular (indexical) aspect of contextual meaning is different from that which is studied in the discipline of pragmatics. While pragmatics deals with how context affects utterances and conversations, indexicality rather has to do with how language *uses* context, and "[...] how and where linguistic forms 'point to' aspects of social or cultural contexts." (Ahearn 2011:28) Naturally, these aspects change according to different social, cultural, and linguistic contexts, based primarily on the matrix culture of what language is being spoken, and the social and cultural mores tied to a given language.

Gaming exists as a social practice within the larger matrix culture of wherever a given game has been written, developed, published, and played. Furthermore, gaming is undoubtedly a social practice; gaming is a universe of discourse, and the wider community of gamers is also a universe of discourse. Games often communicate to players via language, and gamers communicate with each other in various languages both within and outside of video games; additionally, video games and video game literacy both have linguistic and quasi-linguistic components that exist within a game's story-world as well as in the real world. (Bogost 2008:119-120) Duranti continues in regards to indexicality (from above):

> [Indexicality] means to work at identifying how language becomes a tool through which our social and cultural world is constantly described, evaluated, and reproduced.

It is precisely this aspect of indexicality (and therefore, this aspect of language) that video games utilize and that makes video games social texts, as Jones (2008) notes. Game-playing is a social practice that has a strong (and ever-growing) presence in our world today, and games exist as a social space encompassing several points: the game, the player, the social space that exists between the game and the player via their communication, *and* the social knowledge that informs the player's experience playing the game. A given "conversation" may happen between the player and the game, or between two players by means of the game, but regardless, conversation and discourse are social practices, and video games can be a vehicle for these social practices.

Furthermore, as Bogost (2008) notes:

> [...] video games are not just stages that facilitate cultural, social, or political practices; they are also media where cultural values themselves can be represented – for critique, satire, education, or commentary. When understood in this way, we can learn to read games as deliberate expressions of particular perspectives. In other words, video games make claims about the world, which players can understand, evaluate, and deliberate.
> (Bogost 2008:119)

These final three points echo Duranti's definition of indexicality almost exactly. Players understand, evaluate, and deliberate the claims made by video games; video games themselves are texts in which, through the language that is used, the world is described, evaluated, and reproduced. The types of statements (or claims about the world) a video game makes can range from an explanation of debt and socioeconomic power in *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo, 2001) to describing the use of nuclear weapons as indiscriminate and horrifying in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2007). However, the power to make claims about the world is not unique to video games; television, film, novels, and many other narrative mediums do the

same. What sets video games apart from more traditional media is that, as Bogost says above, video games facilitate cultural, social, or political practices; they are *social* texts.

Video games make their claims about the world in a way that is fundamentally different from a novel, a film, or a television show – a player *experiences* the claims or events that are made in a video game. That is to say, because video games are an interactive medium, their players *experience* the claims that video games make by interacting with the game itself. The medium through which a player interacts with the game can – and often does – take the form of an avatar, or player character, and such a player character will have their own identity within the scope of the video game. This identity will similarly be one that players can understand, evaluate, and deliberate; it will also be something that the player access through the character's dialogue, if present, and this dialogue, by nature, will be indexical; it will describe, evaluate, and reproduce not only the game's story-world, but also the real world itself.

5. IDENTITY

The things people say can reveal them as gamers, readers, political activists, member of a certain religion, or a plethora of other identities. As language-users, each person makes conscious and unconscious choices as they create utterances and weave them together. Whether phonological, morphological, syntactic, or lexical, each linguistic choice comes together in ways that bring speakers closer to or farther from social norms, in ways that ally speakers with a particular group or against it, and in ways that are unique to each person. The way we speak is a way to forge identities, and a way for both conscious and unconscious expressions of self to surface.

> I've been farming the Rakkaholics Anonymous turn-in to Mordecai for, like, two hours now to try and spawn a Sloth that has any prefix but Cartel and any element but slag.

This above example statement indexes several things about the hypothetical speaker. Primarily, it shows that the speaker is talking about the video game *Borderlands 2,* and therefore must be a gamer; furthermore, it shows that they are "farming" – attempting to get a certain intended item, usually by quitting and restarting – a certain point in the game (in this case, the item is a reward for completing the "Rakkaholics Anonymous" mission). On a level deeper than the surface, someone familiar with the game will know that the speaker prefers sniper rifles over pistols (as there is a choice between the two as the mission reward), that they don't care for an item that grants additional melee bonuses, and that they don't like guns that are slag-elemental. On an even deeper level, this statement indexes that the speaker is dedicated (or bored) enough to spend two hours trying to get the right "type" of item, that they know the game's weapon-generating algorithm well enough to know how the prefix and name system works, and that they are willing to do optional missions like the Rakkaholics Anonymous mission.

Indexicality is, in a way, iterative. Each indexed component can also, in turn, index something else, and just as real-life utterances index a wealth of things about their speakers in this way, so too do utterances within any kind of story-world, regardless of medium. Language is deeply interconnected with the story (as well as the larger story-world) that is being told to the audience, whether spoken, written, read aloud, performed, filmed, or presented as an interactive narrative via a video game. In this way, indexicality plays a double role in a video game. Within the sphere of a game itself, indexicality functions at the "micro" level of a game's story-world, but indexicality is also a part of how players interpret information provided by a game at the real-world "macro" level. The player character, as the player's main point of entry into a video

game and its story-world, is the means by which, echoing Duranti, a player describes, evaluates, and reproduces the "micro" and "macro" levels of our social and cultural worlds.

5.1 THROUGH THE EYES OF THE PLAYER CHARACTER

In certain games with a set narrative, (e.g., *The Legend of Zelda* series, Nintendo, 1986-2016; the *Pokemon* series, Game Freak, 1999-2016; *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare,* etc.) the player's avatar may have no dialogue, whether spoken aloud or written via text. The player character might pant while running, shout, or grunt, but the "silent protagonist" is very common in games that do not allow for narrative-altering choices. While a silent protagonist would seem to be a case of a lack of the aforementioned pragmatic "filter" through which a player must interpret the game speaking to them, non-player characters will nonetheless address the player character, rather than the player; the only difference is that the player character will not respond verbally, whether "verbally" is via text or voice acting.

One of the most interesting cases of this trope (and its subversion) occurs throughout the *Halo* saga. *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Bungie Studios) was released in 2001 for Xbox along with the launch of the console, and became one of the most successful, most critically acclaimed, and most important games in history[4]. (IGN, 2010) As a sci-fi first-person shooter, it follows the Master Chief Petty Officer John-117[5], an experimental supersoldier, and his AI companion, Cortana, as they fight in the war against the alien army known as the Covenant, and happen to discover a ring-shaped space station made neither by humanity nor by the Covenant – the game's titular "halo."

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[4] *Halo* is arguably single-handedly responsible for the success of the Xbox, and for the future successes of all first-person shooters on console, which had previously flopped in comparison to their successful counterparts on PCs.
[5] Often referred to as (the) Chief or (the) Master Chief, or John.

The game has a number of cinematic cutscenes, usually at the start and end of each level and with a few in between, and were it not for a handful of lines in certain cutscenes, Chief would be a silent protagonist. In *Halo: Combat Evolved*, throughout just less than an hour's worth of cinematics, Chief has exactly 30 lines, including those such as "yes sir" and "no sir." Most of the dialogue in the game is instead relegated to Cortana, his AI; she speaks during cutscenes and during combat, and she is the one who leads Chief through the exploration of Halo. Cortana is the brains, as it were, and Chief is the brawn. In *Halo*'s sequels, *Halo 2* and *Halo 3* (Bungie Studios, 2004, 2007), the situation is similar; Chief has very few lines, and while he (and the player, through him) drives most of the action in the games, he acts *almost* as a blank slate. However, this does not mean that Chief's language somehow lacks indexicality; indexicality is an intrinsic feature of language, though less dialogue entails fewer instances where something may be indexed.

As Duranti says, language is a way through which we *reproduce* our social and cultural worlds and universes of discourse – and a player's perception of a character's identity often hinges on their cultural knowledge, both of video game and gamer culture, and of the larger matrix culture[6]. Each of Chief's few lines in the first three *Halo* games serves to index Chief within the story-world *as well as* outside of it, using the player's expectations and cultural knowledge to do so. From *Halo 2*:

> **Fleet Admiral Lord Hood:** They're going to try to take our MAC guns offline, give their capital ships a straight shot at Earth. *(Looks to John-117)* Master Chief, defend this station!
> **Master Chief:** Yes, sir. *(to Johnson)* I need a weapon.
> **Sergeant Johnson:** Right this way.

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[6] All of the video games used in this study were written and developed in the United States, and so carry with them aspects of Western and specifically American culture.

As Chief is a soldier, much of his dialogue reflects this. His identity of being a soldier is shown in his statements such as "yes, sir" – clearly indexing with the real-life identity of a soldier in the military – but also in statements like the following exchange from *Halo: Combat Evolved*:

> *Master Chief:* How much firepower would you need to crack one of the engine's shields?
> *Cortana:* Not much. A well-placed grenade perhaps, but why–?
> *[Cortana, a hologram, turns to see Chief, who is calmly tossing a fragmentation grenade up and down.]*
> *Cortana:* (*nods*) Okay, I'm coming with you.

The entire exchange indexes Chief's status as a soldier; he asks about firepower, and when Cortana gives him a reply, he responds by (non-verbally) signalling that he will solve his "problem" in a stereotypically military way, with force. The majority of Chief's dialogue is focused on what is exactly in front of him; almost everything he says is reactionary, either to another character's dialogue, or to the situation.

Chief was written specifically to appeal to players in the same way that a completely silent protagonist is meant to appeal to players: to lessen the filter through which a player experiences the game (that is to say, the avatar). In a 2007 interview near the release of *Halo 3*, one of the lead writers of the series responded to a series of questions about Chief's laconic nature.

> *[Interviewer]:* How did you deal with the strong, silent type leading the narrative?
>
> *Frank O'Connor:* Um, I think it's pretty vital and you can't do it in a movie because you'd have to watch the movie from a first-person perspective to really believe it and really fill those shoes.
> I think the advantage we have with the Chief is that he's kind of bifurcated; he is a strong, silent type with an actual machismo personality and a get-the-job-done tone of voice. **He's also so quiet and so invisible, literally, that the player gets to pretend they're the Chief.** The player gets to inhabit those shoes - men and women can apply their own personality. In a way, that makes it very easy for the writer; they don't have to define the Chief's personality.

[Interviewer]: That's very interesting - does that mean you can't write a 'big reveal' such as what the Chief looks like underneath his helmet, for example? That would potentially spoil the player's imagining of who the Chief is.

Frank O'Connor: Well, for one thing, Eric Nylund[7] has already described his features and given him more personality, so revealing his face is not as important as revealing the outcome of the events of the universe around him.

All these enormous things are happening around him; for all intents and purposes, the Chief is just a very brave soldier. But meanwhile, the entire galaxy is in jeopardy; a galaxy-spanning civilisation [sic] is having a civil war and secrets are getting ready to be unveiled - and **Chief, as much as he is the pivot of these events, is not the important thing. The events and his effects on them are. Himself? Not so much.** *(emphasis mine)*

These interviews establish that Chief was meant to be a protagonist who has just enough of a personality or identity to *not* be a blank slate, but who is silent enough that players can become him and "fill those shoes." Chief's malleability is due to his dialogue – truthfully, the lack thereof – rather than his actions. It is the fact that Chief does not speak that prompts critics of the *Halo* series to call him a "bland protagonist" and a "character without any character." His actions as a hero are never discussed as a defining personality trait when the series is reviewed, but rather his *lack of speech*, and subsequent "lack of personality," are often brought up.

When *Halo 4* (343 Industries) was released in 2012, the complaints against Chief's personality increased a thousandfold – not because he didn't speak, but because he spoke too much. In *Halo 4*, Chief has almost three times the amount of lines as he has in *Halo: Combat Evolved, Halo 2,* and *Halo 3* combined. While Chief's dialogue in the first three *Halo* games was restricted mostly to one-word responses to questions (and especially utterances such as "understood" or "sir") and short sentences, his dialogue in *Halo 4* contains a significant amount of emotion. The narrative in *Halo 4* is deeply personal and emotionally complex in a way that the

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[7] There are a series of novels that detail John's childhood and his military career up to the point where the games begin; some were written by Eric Nylund.

previous three *Halo* games are not, and Chief's dialogue – especially his and Cortana's exchanges – reflect this. Chief's utterances show a range of emotion that had previously only been shown non-verbally, such as his stubbornness, recklessness, and drive to do what is morally right, and it is only when these facets of his personality are realized *verbally* that they get recognized as such by the players. It is Chief's *discourse* that is key in building these previously "un-built" aspects of his identity, and especially his emotional identity, in *Halo 4*[8].

With this distinction between the first three *Halo* games and *Halo 4*, it becomes clear that *speech itself* is an identity-building act. In *Halo 4*, Chief has comparatively outstanding 237 lines of dialogue, compared to 30 in *Halo: Combat Evolved,* 18 in *Halo 2*, and 36 in *Halo 3*. As mentioned earlier, if there is no dialogue or discourse present, then indexicality cannot surface linguistically. While a "silent protagonist" player character can be described by other non-player characters and indexed within the story-world through these rather one-sided "conversations," when a player character speaks, they index their identity not only within the story-world and the real world, but also *directly to the player*. When a player character builds their own identity, they build an identity that the player *must* perform while playing a game.

Borderlands 2 and *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* show a distinction similar to that of the original *Halo* trilogy and *Halo 4*. In the *Borderlands* games[9] (Gearbox Software, 2009-2014), the player can choose between several characters to play as, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. In *Borderlands* and *Borderlands 2,* these characters, similar to the Master Chief, do not speak much; they each have a series of scripted lines, or "barks," that are triggered during certain situations, such as general combat, the use of their special skill, or narrowly avoiding

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[8] I specify in *Halo 4* because in the novels, Chief is more talkative than in the games; however, the novels are "optional material," and not all who play the games read the novels.

[9] Currently, a series of three games: *Borderlands* (2009)*, Borderlands 2* (2012)*,* and *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* (2014).

death. Though each set of barks is fairly short, each character's distinct personality shines

through nonetheless. For example, one of the player characters in *Borderlands 2*, Maya, has

special powers that allow the player to levitate enemies in combat; another, Axton, is an ex-

military man gone AWOL who has an automatic turret he can deploy.

> *Some of Maya's barks:*
>> Wasn't even close!
>> That was awesome!
>> Fear me, bitches!
>> Stop struggling!
>> Looks like my training is paying off!
>> I've gotta think about this.
>> Always more to learn.
>> So it goes…
>> Wisdom is strength.

> *Some of Axton's barks:*
>> Bad guys: zero, turret: a whole bunch!
>> Autogun's chewin' 'em up!
>> That's right! Let [the turret] mow you down!
>> Beats the hell outta basic training.
>> Oh, I love this planet!
>> Like I was gonna die!
>> Ha! Did you miss me?
>> Ha! Did you see his face?
>> Hey, stand in front of this!
>> Oscar-mike!

From these lines, a player can tell that Maya is a bit of a thrill-seeker and that she has a

bit of a playful side ("Wasn't even close!", "Fear me, bitches!"), but looking more in-depth,

Maya also values careful consideration, thoughtfulness, and knowledge ("Always more to learn,"

"I've gotta think about this"). Axton's personality and history also shines through his scripted

shout-outs; his military background is obvious when he speaks ("Beats the hell outta basic

training," "oscar-mike"). Axton is much more overconfident than Maya ("Like I was gonna die!"

"Did you miss me?"), and also more likely to taunt enemies ("Let [the turret] mow you down!", "Hey, stand in front of this!"). Even from a fairly small collection of dialogue, the identity of each character is established firmly.

However, in *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel*, each player character has speaking lines during gameplay[10]. *The Pre-Sequel* expands on the combat barks that helped build the player characters' identities in *Borderlands 2* by adding fully communicative scripted dialogue wherein each player character will take part in conversations with non-player character, as can be seen below, where each player character introduces themselves at the beginning of the game:

> ***Athena:*** This is Athena, reporting in.
> ***Wilhelm:*** Wilhelm here. Tell me what to shoot and how much I'm gettin' paid.
> ***Nisha:*** This is Nisha. Let's tear some stuff up.
> ***Claptrap:*** Experimental Prototype FR4G-TP[11], reporting for duty!
> ***Timothy[12]:*** The real Jack – not the fake one – reporting for duty!
> ***Aurelia:*** Well, as my butler was eaten alive hours ago, I suppose I shall introduce *myself*: Lady Aurelia Hammerlock. A pleasure.

Like the short character barks in *Borderlands 2*, the scripted lines in *The Pre-Sequel* – as well as the barks – serve to index each player character within the story-world as well as within the real world. Every character except for Aurelia was either introduced in *Borderlands* or in *Borderlands 2*, and the ways in which they express their personalities in *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* reinforces how they have been portrayed in their previous appearances. Aurelia, while being a new character in the story-world, is still indexed among the existing cast of characters, as her brother is Sir Hammerlock from *Borderlands 2*. Furthermore, she and her brother both are indexed in the real world by virtue of their surname, a portmanteau of flintlock, a type of 19th-

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[10] As opposed to in a cutscene; the game's narrative is framed as a story being told, and so only the storyteller – who happens to be the player character Athena – has spoken lines in cutscenes.

[11] Read as "Fragtrap," a play on "Claptrap," which in turn comes from CL4P-TP, his model name.

[12] Timothy is a body double for a character named Jack, who is the person hiring the player characters to do mercenary work, and the person to whom they are reporting.

century firearm mechanism, and hammer, another firearm mechanism; they are both big game hunters, both speak a variety of British English (further reinforcing the image of the colonialist big game hunter), and Aurelia constantly indexes her high social status (e.g., "my butler"). Athena is a former military assassin; she is "reporting in," and the statement indexes itself among other such "military" lingo as has been seen from Axton (*Borderlands 2*) and the Master Chief (*Halo*).

A player *must* have a point of reference from which to view a video game, and most often, the player character fills this role. Furthermore, when a player character has a speaking role, the player is able to experience the player character's identity firsthand, and the player also *performs* the identity of the player character by virtue of playing the game through their eyes. When a player character speaks, they index to the player their own identities as they are indexed within the story-world – thus building the story-world itself through their discourse – as well as how those identities are indexed within the real world.

5.2 EXPRESSION OF QUEER IDENTITIES

As the queer[13] community continues to grow more vocal and gain acceptance in mainstream Western culture, the push for more inclusion and representation of queer people in *all* media has also grown exponentially. Queer identities have found a home in many facets of new media, ranging from webcomics to webseries, and video games have been no exception. Many role-playing games allow a player to enter a same-sex relationship with another character, and many games of all genres feature queer non-player characters. However, queer player characters in video games that do *not* feature a "romance" component are much rarer.

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[13] I am using this term to describe people who identify as non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender.

The *Borderlands* series features a multiplayer mode where two to four players can play together cooperatively and work together to finish challenging quests or defeat challenging bosses. When playing together, players can revive one another, or duel in order to claim items. There is an additional set of character barks that are triggered during cooperative play: when a player joins another's game, the player character will introduce themselves; when a player is reviving another, the player character will make some sort of encouraging (or taunting) comment; and when being revived, the player character may thank their reviver, or simply utilize one of their normal barks.

Originally due to a programming bug, one of the player characters in *Borderlands 2*, Axton, has flirtatious barks that are triggered during cooperative play regardless of the gender of the other player character.

> *[While reviving another player character]:* Wow, do you work out, or…?
> *[While initiating a duel]:* If I win, we're totally making out.

However, the game developers decided to keep this "bug" and quietly confirm Axton as a bisexual man. Furthermore, there were a number of expansions released for *Borderlands 2*, and starting with the fourth, *Tiny Tina's Attack On Dragon Keep*, player characters began to have speaking lines in response to the narrator as she leads a *Dungeons & Dragons*-esque role-playing game; this also served as a precursor to the frequency of player characters' speaking lines in *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel*. The game developers chose this opportunity to outright, irrefutably, verbally confirm Axton as bisexual:

> *[Responding to what he will spend prize money on]:* Guns and women. And sometimes dudes.

As explored previously, *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* expands upon the amount of player character dialogue from *Borderlands 2*, and has a plethora of scenes throughout the game where

the player character speaks to NPCs; again, the player has no control over what is being said

(i.e., no dialogue options, no option to ignore or refuse an NPC, etc.). Because each player

character has a distinctly different personality, there are a small number of minor deviations in an

NPC's behavior towards them, and vice-versa; while neither the plot of the game nor the player's

experience change based on which character you play as, certain NPCs will behave more

friendly or less friendly towards your player character.

In the very beginning of *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel*, the player character and the

protagonist, Jack, get acquainted over a voice communication system. At this first meeting, each

player character will introduce themselves, and Jack will respond uniquely to each of them,

though most of his responses are similar in conveyed message. Two of the three women get a

very similar response to the two men; for example, Jack's responses to Athena and to Wilhelm

are very similar.

> ***To Athena:*** Oh man, the ex-Lance Assassin? Awesome. Big fan.
> ***To Wilhelm:*** Hah, the galaxy's most feared Enforcer! Right on. Digging the beard.

Aurelia, the second female playable character, gets a similar response: "Hey, you made it!

Great!" It is with the *third* female character, Nisha, where Jack deviates in his response.

> ***To Nisha:*** The bandit who kills bandits. I'm especially looking forward to knowing you better -- just casually, at first.

Here, Jack's language, in context with the larger scenario, expresses several things: that he is the

person who hired your player character, and that he is interested romantically in your player

character[14] if you are playing as Nisha. This is expanded upon throughout the game – Jack flirts

with Nisha often, and she is the only player character with whom he flirts. Furthermore, this

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[14] In *Borderlands 2,* Nisha and Jack are dating; *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* was released after *Borderlands 2*, but takes place before the events of *Borderlands 2*, so players familiar with the series will recognize Nisha as Jack's future girlfriend.

statement is indexical in regards to the story-world: players familiar with the *Borderlands* series will know that in *Borderlands 2*, which chronologically takes place after *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel*, Jack and Nisha are dating.

Another NPC whom the player meets early in the game has a similar split in how she treats your player character. Janey Springs is a lesbian, and while she responds positively to most of the other five player characters, as she is a friendly and helpful person, she shows specific interest in Athena.

> ***To Nisha:*** The outlaw bandit-killer? I've heard of you.
> ***To Aurelia:*** Works for me!
> ***To Athena***: [drawn out, voice low] Well, *hello*.

However, one of the male player characters attempts to flirt with Janey upon meeting her, and she does not stand for it.

> ***Timothy[15], to Janey:*** *[drawn out, voice low]* The name's Jack... babe.
> ***Janey, to Timothy:*** *[flat, clipped]* Well. Nice to meet you, Jack.

Janey, like Jack, expresses several things in this exchange: that she is friendly (as she has just cheerfully rescued the player character), that she is interested in women (specifically, in Athena), and that she does not tolerate flirty behavior from men. In fact, Janey goes on to explicitly confirm that she is not interested in men at all in the exchange below, which takes place during the following mission[16]:

> ***Athena***: Why are we killing Deadlift, again?
> ***Janey:*** He's kind of a dick.
> ***Athena:*** Is there anything else, or…?

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[15] As Timothy is actually a body double for Jack, he therefore looks and sounds exactly like Jack. Timothy's personality is wildly different from Jack's, though he often tries to act like Jack (i.e., like a self-proclaimed "lady killer"), as he is supposed to be a body double. This is an occasion where Timothy is "playing" Jack; he often makes "ladies' man" remarks like this and then promptly expresses disgust as an aside.

[16] While Athena's dialogue is used here, Janey's dialogue is the same regardless of player character. Each player character asks the same question (to the effect of why they are to kill Deadlift).

> ***Janey:*** Well, he also stole my Moon Zoomy digistruct key, stranded me out here, and got really rude when I told him I wasn't into guys. But mainly the being-a-dick thing.
> *(The conversation is interrupted.)*

Here, the indexical nature of language shines yet again: Janey expresses to every player character – not just to Athena – that she is not interested in men. With her last line, Janey indexes her queer identity alongside that of countless women (especially and specifically, lesbian women) who are met with hostility upon expressing their lack of interest to a man.

In the *Borderlands* series, a character's expression of sexuality is never a defining characteristic of the narrative, though it *is* a defining characteristic of that character's identity. There are no situations where a player character's expression of queerness is met with negativity, or questioned; especially in *Borderlands 2,* where the only outright expressions of queerness from a player character are framed in such a way that they are met with complete neutrality and presented as matter of fact. Furthermore, the *Borderlands* universe is also replete with queer non-player characters who are very open about their queerness; Janey Springs is the most prominent of these, though many other non-player characters are also vocal about their queer identity. A number of these non-player characters will flirt with the player character, regardless of gender, and the player character does not react verbally because there is no scripted dialogue – and because there is no scripted dialogue for the player character, there can be no "refusal" of this queerness by the player, as is often the case in choice-based video games.

Sexuality is an area where paratext becomes crucially important in building identity. As Bourgonjon says, "[...] paratexts offer ample opportunity for creating identity"; as video games grow more and more intertextual, paratexts are growing more closely linked to the main text. As expansions can also be considered paratext, Axton's outright statement of his bisexuality in *Borderlands 2*'s expansion *Tiny Tina's Attack On Dragon Keep* is an expression of his identity

that only exists within the paratext. To use *Borderlands 2* as a further example, the game's writers and developers made a statement about the sexualities of several more characters in an interview discussing issues of inclusion and representation. (Game Revolution, 2014)

> "If we ever make another Borderlands game and Maya the Siren from *Borderlands 2* is a non-playable character, I wrote her with the intention that she's asexual. There's a thing going on with her with Krieg (the Psycho class) in the short video we did where he has a big crush on her. But if everything goes according to plan, she will not reciprocate because she's asexual in my mind."

> "One of my favorite aspects of Sir Hammerlock's character isn't that he's gay; it's that his sexuality actually doesn't matter. What's cool about that is when [he] reveals it that it's sort of like "oh, yeah, I had an old boyfriend," and it's as if it's totally normal. **And we'd like to think that in Pandora, in this universe we created, there's absolutely nothing odd about that at all, where it's just totally the course of normal existence.** And that's awesome. I like that."

While this is "only" paratextual information, as Jones (2008) states, this does *not* make it any less significant to the story-world or to the identities within that story-world. Additionally, this particular paratext also serves to reinforce how indexicality can build not only identities, but also story-worlds. The full quote from Sir Hammerlock, summarized in the interview, reads as follows:

> An old boyfriend of mine, by the name of Taggart, was hired to wipe out the Stalker population here a while back. He also, adorably, tried to write a book [...] You find the chapters of his book and I'll plagiarize the living daylights out of them for mine.

Randy Pitchford, CEO of Gearbox Software, says in the interview that "in this universe we created [...] it's just totally the course of normal existence." By framing Hammerlock's statement of his sexuality as simply an offhanded statement about a former partner, Hammerlock indexes his place in a story-world where queerness is "the course of normal existence" – and, as has been

shown, this model is followed by many other player and non-player characters both inside and outside the main text of the game.

To reiterate Duranti's definition of indexicality once more, it is the fact that language *describes*, *evaluates*, and *reproduces* our social and cultural world. In the conversation between Athena and Janey Springs, the quote from Sir Hammerlock, and the interview with Randy Pitchford, the social and cultural world of *Borderlands* is being described and evaluated, and the real world is *simultaneously* being described, evaluated, and reproduced. The above collection of quotes *describes* a world where any sexuality is "totally the course of normal existence," and it *evaluates* discussing one's sexuality as something that is completely acceptable in any context. It also *reproduces* the real world, as the real world has men who have boyfriends, and women who "[aren't] into" men. Furthermore, as this collection of quotes reproduces the real world, it also *evaluates* that reproduction; the real world is, in this moment, *not* a world where any sexuality is "totally the course of normal existence*,*" nor is it a world where discussing one's sexuality is appropriate (or safe) in many contexts. In sum, the *Borderlands* series is, through its linguistic choices, making the claim that while the real world is not a place where freedom of expression is common place, it *should* be, like the story-world of Pandora is. It is the language used within the game's story-world that allows that story-world – and the characters within it – to connect with the real world.

6. THE NARRATIVE AND THE STORY-WORLD

6.1 GENDER AND THE NARRATIVE

Of the roughly 21,000 video games that have been published to date, an estimated 1,400 games have female protagonists, and an additional estimated 200 have protagonists of selectable gender[17]. To reiterate the Entertainment Software Ratings Board's statistics on gamer gender, in 2015, 56% of gamers were male, and 44% were female; this is compared to 6.67% of games with female protagonists, and a further 1.67% with a *possible* female protagonist. While there are video games without a gendered player character or, indeed, without a player character at all (e.g., puzzle games, "god mode" games, etc.), there is still *clearly* a bias towards the male in the gaming industry.

However, games with protagonists of selectable gender are becoming much more common, therefore bringing more options for the player character to *not* be male. When there is such a choice in the protagonist's gender, this does not always affect the narrative itself. *Destiny* is an example of this, featuring a player character of selectable gender, with no choice in dialogue, no narrative-altering options given to the player, and a static narrative regardless of the player character's gender, class, or race[18]. Furthermore, the dialogue for any player character is exactly the same - again, regardless of gender, class, or race.

> *Mysterious Stranger:* Guardian, I know what you're about to do. It's brave, but there are enemies out here you would not believe.
> *Guardian:* Out where?

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[17] Numbers taken from Wikipedia; therefore, they are only rough estimates. Calculated using the "video games by year," "video games featuring female protagonists," and "video games featuring protagonists of selectable gender" category pages.

[18] There are two gender options (male and female), three class options (Hunter, Warlock, and Titan), and three race options: Human, Awoken (humanoids with purple-blue skin), and Exos (sapient humanoid robots).

Fig. 6 – A cutscene from *Destiny,* where the player character is male.

Fig. 7 – The same cutscene as in Fig. 6, except the player character is female.

In a case such as this, it would seem that the bias towards the male present in the ESRB's statistics has been counteracted; the male and female characters receive equal representation via an equal amount of dialogue. *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* also offers an interesting perspective on this; there are six possible player characters, three of which are women. Each player character has a unique set of scripted lines in response to non-player characters, but the narrative – regardless of player character – remains the same. In this segment, each of the six player characters respond to a question early in the game:

> *Janey Springs:* So what are you doing here?
>
> *Athena:* We need to get back to Helios Station, but we can't until we take down a jamming signal somewhere on this moon.
> *Wilhelm:* Trying to get back to Helios. There's a jammin' signal around here we gotta take care of first, though.
> *Nisha:* Need to get back to that big H in the sky, but there's a jamming signal somewhere on the moon. Gotta bust that first or we'll just get kicked out again.
> *Claptrap:* There is a signal somewhere on the moon that is jamming Helios Station's defenses! To return to Helios, we need to destroy the jamming signal!
> *Timothy:* There's a jamming signal somewhere around here. Need to shut that down and head back to Helios Station.
> *Aurelia:* Something about a "jamming signal?" I was paying effectively *zero* attention.

Most other NPC interactions follow the same thread (minus any exceptions, like Jack with Nisha, or Janey with Athena). Whether you play as one of the three female characters, one of the two human male characters, or as the "male" robot, you are treated as a hired gun and a(n) (in)famous mercenary. Most of the non-player character dialogue goes out of its way to be un-gendered; most likely, to avoid having to have recorded multiple sets of lines for each scene. Your player character is almost always referred to as "Vault Hunter" (or, in *Destiny*, as "Guardian") and addressed directly in the second person; to maintain this gender neutrality, no

player character acts too stereotypically male or too stereotypically female so as to not create any situations where the player character's dialogue would seem out of place (i.e., "too male" or "too female"). Furthermore, all player characters react to the non-player characters in more or less the same way (i.e., in terms of message conveyed), and differences in dialogue mostly serve to create character identities.

In *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, Deborah Tannen makes a distinction between *rapport-talk* and *report-talk*. She defines rapport-talk as "a way of [...] displaying similarities and matching experiences," and report-talk as "exhibiting knowledge and skill, and [...] imparting information." (Tannen 1990:75) While both men and women are, of course, fully capable of both rapport-talk and of report-talk, rapport-talk is associated with "female speech" and report-talk is associated with "male speech." Rapport-talk is characterized by sharing information – often, emotional information – with the goal of *matching experiences* in order to build and maintain relationships, while report-talk is characterized by verbal performance and "instruction" to maintain a hierarchy in relationships. (Tannen 1990:74-95)

All six player characters in *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* respond very similarly in conversations with non-player characters, and each of their answers seems to be report-talk. In fact, *The Pre-Sequel* does not allow for much rapport-talk at all; your player character does not speak extremely often, and when they do speak, it tends to be either in response to a direct question, to introduce themselves, or to ask a reactionary question (e.g., "What was that?"). Considering the "action" nature of the video game, it makes sense for each of these warrior characters to be more focused on report-talk than on rapport-talk. Similarly, in *Destiny*, the player character speaks quite rarely, and only to react to a situation or ask a question.

However, with this, the previous statement that the male bias seems to have been eliminated must be re-examined. These player characters – and many, many more besides – highly "prefer" report-talk to rapport-talk; report-talk is "male speech," and is therefore associated with men; as such, it is highly debatable whether this is truly *equal* treatment. In Western society there is an *overwhelming* bias towards the male and male-typed, to the effect that unisex clothing is often simply men's clothing labeled as unisex. Women can wear traditionally "male" clothing (e.g., suits, blazers, collared shirts) without backlash, but men cannot wear traditionally "female" clothing without *incredible* amounts of backlash. (Williams, 2015) In this vein, it would seem that rapport-talk has no place in the world of a video game such as *Destiny, Halo*, or *Borderlands*, but rather only in a social game in which the goal is to create emotional connections between your player character and others, such as the *Animal Crossing* series (Nintendo, 2001-2015).

A notable exception to this trend is, surprisingly, found in *Destiny*. While the player characters themselves do not speak often (and only in cutscenes), much of the game's "dialogue" comes in the form of barks, as was seen in *Borderlands 2* – however, it is not the player character who receives these barks, as in the *Borderlands series*, but the player character's companion, their Ghost. Within the story-world, each Guardian has their own Ghost, an AI-like companion who helps a Guardian store items, travel, scan the surroundings, and receive messages, and each Ghost will "resurrect" a player if they die during gameplay. A player's Ghost often makes remarks about the surroundings, or offers advice to the player.

> *Upon landing on a planet:*
> Do you ever wish we'd never woken the Hive? Oh, but think of all the fun we've had!
> Careful around the Hellmouth, Guardian. Getting some strange energy fluctuations.
> Did you see that? I think that patch of chitin just blinked at me!

We really do visit the most *charming* places.

When a public event is announced:
This could be good.
Hang on, we might have a problem.
Okay, we're on it.
You're the boss.
We can do this – I hope.
Well done.

Upon finishing a Patrol:
I'll update the Tower.
Well, that had to ruin their day. I'll make sure the City hears.
Okay, I'll inform Levante.
Well, I think you got your point across.
I wonder what our friends want to do with these. I'll alert the Tower.

All of these lines are undoubtedly *rapport-talk*. They do not impart "necessary" information or knowledge; they are simply a way of "establishing connections and negotiating relationships." (Tannen 1990:77). Ghost's barks – especially those when landing on a planet – are notably devoid of "information" to impart, and instead are akin to emotional reaction: "Do you ever wish we'd never woken the Hive? [...]" is a rhetorical question that Ghost proceeds to answer immediately; "I think that patch of chitin just blinked at me!" is purely an emotional reaction to landing in a "scary" spot; and Ghost's comments throughout a public event range from caution to encouragement.

This brings into question the *purpose* of a character such as Ghost – one linked so closely to the player character as to be almost an extension of them, and yet without the key feature of being a true avatar. Drawing purely from the above analysis of Ghost (and similar characters; Cortana from *Halo* could also be seen as such), it seems that their role is to be the "emotional" voice of the story-world, in such a way that the player character can respond to the "rapport"

being built, and connect more deeply to the story-world, while *not* breaking the immersion via silence (or relative silence) offered by the avatar itself.

6.2 STORYTELLING: HEROES, VILLAINS, AND MORALITY

Stories are told because they are important. As Janey Springs says (with great self-awareness) in *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel*, "[...] Stories don't have to be true to be believed. They just have to be told." Storytelling has been a cornerstone of human culture for millennia, and video games have taken on the mantle of storytelling as they continue to be at the forefront of narrative art. While, as stated, not every video game contains a narrative, video games are absolutely a narrative medium. In fact, Henry Jenkins (2004) proposes that video games should be "[examined] less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility." All storytelling, in any medium, reflects and draws from its matrix culture. Popular and folkloric stories, myths, and fables usually have happy endings where the hero wins or saves the day; the protagonist is the hero, the antagonist is the villain, and the lines between good and evil are, classically, drawn quite cleanly.

However, many stories, of all time periods and in all media, utilize the audience's cultural expectations *against* them. Like in other media, not all video games have a clear-cut distinction between "good" and "bad," or even between hero and villain. In choice-based, open-world games, the morality of the player character is dependent upon the player themselves, but in games that are not choice-based, the moral universe lies established within the narrative's story-world. Narratives that have morality at their center often use dialogue between characters to expose and discuss it, which not only builds the story-world, but also fleshes out a character's moral identity.

The *Borderlands* series draws heavily upon the cultural expectation that comes with storytelling. All of the games in the series use storytelling as a framing device, and each game's introduction consists of a cinematic cutscene wherein a non-player character later met in the game narrates a story while a series of stylized, cartoonish "sketches" portraying the characters and events he describes are shown, mimicking a storybook. In addition, several of the expansions also have a similar introduction, further reinforcing not only that games are a form of storytelling, but also through this act indexing storytelling as an important facet of the story-world itself. In *Captain Scarlett And Her Pirate's Booty*, an expansion for *Borderlands 2*, the narrator from the beginning of the game is heard once more, this time allowing a young boy to tell the story; again, this indexes the importance of storytelling within the story-world (i.e., that it is something to be passed on to children), and it *also* resonates with storytelling in the real world, as something that adults share with children, and as a way to pass culture along to future generations.

Borderlands 2 in particular heavily utilizes classic story archetypes in order to develop its narrative. It tells the story of a conflict on the alien planet of Pandora: one side wants to bring order to the planet, while the other side wants to keep the planet running on the "every person for themselves" maxim. As the game's introductory cinematic explains:

> So, you want to hear another story, huh? One where the very fate of Pandora hangs in the balance? If not, too bad! I'm telling you anyway. First, there was The Vault – an alien prison opened with a mystical key. To the warriors who opened it, The Vault was just a container of tentacles and disappointment. They vanished into the wastelands, certain that The Vault held no treasure at all. They were wrong. The Vault's opening triggered the growth of Eridium, a priceless alien element. Soon, the rare and valuable mineral emerged all across Pandora. Its appearance attracted many, including the Hyperion Corporation. They came to Pandora to mine Eridium and bring order to the savage planet. Through their excavations, Hyperion uncovered evidence of an even greater Vault. Their leader vowed to find it, to use its power to civilize the borderlands, once and for all – but

> Hyperion weren't the only ones searching for the next Vault's alien power. The call of danger and loot is not so easily resisted. Certain warriors came to Pandora in droves to uncover its hidden secrets. Some would call them "adventurers," others call them "fools," but *I* call them "Vault Hunters." Our story begins with them, and with a man named Handsome Jack.

In this opening cinematic, the game's narrative is framed as a story that is being told by this narrator, and this gets reinforced in the optional series of extended content for the game, each with a similar "storytelling" introduction. The narrator sets up a clear moral conflict between the Hyperion Corporation's leader, Handsome Jack, and the people resisting his efforts to "civilize the borderlands."

Much of the dialogue that drives the narrative in this game and that establishes the story-world takes place over long-range voice communications, and throughout the game, Handsome Jack contacts the Vault Hunters near-constantly. The moral universe he establishes for himself in various quotes like the following is clear.

> Look at those murderous Bloodshots[19]. Don't you think Pandora would be better without their scum? That's all I wanna do – clean up this planet. If that means I've gotta kill bandits like you, like the Bloodshots, like all those Crimson Raider[20] idiots in Sanctuary? Hell, I'm happy to do it.
>
> *[Groans in frustration]* Rrrgh, this is so frustrating. You see, this is what I don't get about you bad guys. You *know* the hero's gonna win, but you just don't die quickly.
>
> I told you guys – the hero always wins.
>
> People of Pandora, my daughter is… dead. Murdered. By the Vault Hunter[21]. So I've decided: I'm rescinding the bounty on the Vault Hunter. If you should kill that child-murdering sonofabitch before I do, I will find you, and you will regret denying me my vengeance.

---

[19] A gang of bandits.

[20] The resistance against Hyperion and Handsome Jack.

[21] She actually died of her own volition, and begged the Vault Hunters' assistance in doing so.

> You're a plague, bandit. You and your kind have corrupted Pandora with your greed and your hatred. It comes down to *me* to save this world from your kind, but I am more than happy to do it.

Handsome Jack places himself in the moral "right" in this strictly us-versus-them conflict – he wants safety and order, unlike all of the bandits (like "you," the player character, and the characters with whom the player sides). His dialogue establishes him as a figure of power; he can reach an audience that comprises the entire planet of Pandora, and what he says to both the player character and to the people inhabiting Pandora establish *them* as opposing him in his moral universe, in the moral "wrong." His word choice is extremely loaded and emotional, and immediately serves to put Handsome Jack (morally) above and against everyone who is resisting him.

The identity that Handsome Jack creates for himself here is that of a hero with a classical hero's burden, tasked with "taming" a wild planet and bringing it under his just rule. However, Handsome Jack's actions very clearly contradict his own placement of himself in the moral "right" of his moral universe. He openly boasts about having murdered people (and indeed, about having committed genocide); he is a megalomaniac and a narcissist, he is endlessly condescending, and he taunts the resistance about the important and well-liked people he has murdered. There is a clear disparity between the way he speaks about himself and the way he acts, yet he clings deeply to his "heroism" – something that manifests itself *only* through his dialogue. Even at the end of the game's narrative, as he is on the verge of death, he continues:

> No, no, no, I can't die like this... not when I'm so close, and not at the hands of a filthy bandit! I could've saved this planet! I could have actually restored order! I wasn't supposed to die by the hands of a child-killing psychopath! You're a savage! You're a maniac! **You are a *bandit* and I am the goddamn *hero!*** You *idiots!* The Warrior could have brought peace to this planet! No more dangerous creatures! No more bandits! Pandora - it could have been a paradise!
> [bold emphasis mine]

His identity is so closely linked to the fantasy he spins in his discourse that even seconds from

death, he cannot admit defeat, because "the hero always wins."

Storytelling is a cultural act, both within a story-world and, of course, in the real world.

Handsome Jack, like many other video game villains, creates his moral identity by indexing it

within the larger realm of storytelling; *Borderlands 2* as a whole, through its framing device of a

story being told, reinforces this. This demonstrates once more the multi-layered nature of

indexicality: by insisting that "the hero always wins," Handsome Jack is identifying himself as

someone who is aware of traditional storytelling tropes; this, in turn, identifies the culture of the

story-world of *Borderlands 2* as one wherein storytelling is valued, as evidenced by the

narrative's introduction as well as by Handsome Jack's familiarity with the "hero always wins"

theme. This is further reflective of the very same in the real world – in the most popular stories

and narratives spanning age, genre, and medium, such as *The Odyssey*, *Harry Potter,* or *The Lion*

King, the heroes do indeed achieve their goals and "win" by that right. The premise of

Borderlands 2 as a subversion of the classic hero-and-villain story archetype is successful

because of the language that Handsome Jack uses to create the hero identity for himself, and

because that language is indexed within the larger real-world Western cultural themes common

to storytelling.

Storytelling, in the most general sense, is at its core a conversation between the storyteller

and the audience. The storyteller makes some claim about the world, and the language they use

describes, evaluates, and reproduces the social and cultural world. The audience can then do

several things: they can see themselves reflected (or not) in this story-world; they can

understand, evaluate, and deliberate these claims as well as *how* they are made; and they can

understand, evaluate, and deliberate how the audience itself is represented in a story-world. In

sum, storytelling is the larger universe of discourse in which video games participate, and it is also a universe of discourse in which *players* participate, both when they are playing a game and when they are participating in social community activities with other players outside the game. It is the players, as the audience, that bring a video game's story and story-world into the real world *through* participating in real-world social communities, and this is where the story-world and all of the identities within it are *described*, *evaluated*, and *reproduced* at "macro" level – in the real world. The claims that are made by a video game's narrative – of morality, of who is allowed to be a hero, of what makes a hero, or countless others – are relevant to the real world *because* they are part of the "conversation" taking place between the game as the storyteller and the player as the audience and as a member of the social and cultural world that is being described, evaluated, and reproduced.

7. FINDINGS

This analysis has explored the role of language in video games; specifically, how language relates to the social identities of both characters within a game's story-world and players in the real world, and how language is used to express this. Indexicality has been the key concept used in throughout this analysis in order to examine language use in video games, and how it relates to the creation of identity. Furthermore, for this analysis and for further analyses, it is important to include the context in which these identities are created and expressed; that is to say, the universe of discourse in which they exist. Context is vitally important to the examination of language in social spaces, as in this analysis.

Firstly, video games use dialogue and discourse in order to build identities within their story-worlds, just as a novel, film, or television series does; this is a fact. Dialogue is a part of the player's experience; it is a part of the game itself, both in terms of the gameplay (i.e., providing information on how to do an activity) and in terms of the story-world. Every time a character has a line of dialogue, or participates in a conversation, they are expressing their identity. This can either be overt, such as stating a fact about themselves, or it can be more covert, using the indexical nature of language to make a statement that connects to and reflects on the story-world. Furthermore, each statement and expression of identity, in this way, serves to build the story-world. As a character expresses their identity or identities, these identities describe, evaluate, and reproduce the story-world, not only to other characters within the story-world, but also to the player.

Each line of dialogue from a character can serve to build their own identity as well as to build the story-world at large. However, these identities, as well as how the story-world "reacts" to them (i.e., positively, negatively, etc.), can also be identities (and expressions thereof) that describe, evaluate, and reproduce the real world *within* the story-world. The story-world identities connect to the real world through the player and, as Bogost (2008) says, "video games make claims about the world, which players can understand, evaluate, and deliberate." Finally, it is important for players of video games – who span the spectrum of race, gender, and sexuality – to see their own identities reflected within video games (see section 8.2, Issues of Representation). The expression of these varied identities, as well as whether and how the story-world's perception of these identities mirrors or rejects the real world, becomes a place for players to connect the real world to a video game's story-world.

8. CONCLUSION

Video games, as a universe of discourse, are a method by which real-world stories and identities can be reflected and showcased. Just as language is one of the key ways in which people express their identities and describe their social and cultural worlds, so too is language key in creating and expressing the identities of characters within video games. The player's interaction with a game's story-world via a player character – and their identity – brings the story-world and its characters into the real world, creating a cycle in which the real world is described, evaluated, and reproduced in a game, and in which players, in return, describe, evaluate, and reproduce a game's story-world in the real world. The video game universe of discourse encompasses not only what is present with the story-worlds of games, but it also encompasses the ways in which players interact with story-worlds, and how players interact with each other in social spaces outside of a given game.

This study has only discussed a mere fraction of the video games that exist, and notably absent are games with a "choice" component. Primarily, this was done in the interest of time; exploring every possible permutation of choices in a choice-based game can take hundreds of hours per game. Secondly, but no less importantly, a game *without* a "choice" component requires a player to perform a specific identity within the narrative and the story-world. This is especially important in examining *how* a linear game chooses to describe, evaluate, and reproduce the real world and its inhabitants.

However, this is not to say that there are games without *any* type of choice. Interactivity is what makes a game a game, and every game consists of choices of some variety, whether they be binary (i.e., pressing or not pressing one button) or diversely branching. A linear game such as

the *Halo* series still offers the player choices – a variety of weapons and supplementary abilities, and a variety of ways to problem-solve and strategize through combat areas. A slightly less linear game, like the *Borderlands* series, offers a player a choice in player character, albeit without any effect on the narrative. By contrast, open-world games such as the *Fallout* series or the *The Elder Scrolls* (Bethesda Softworks; 1997-2015, 1994-2016) series allow extensive customization of the player character, as well as extensive quest systems, allowing for a variety of approaches to the narrative. In spite of this, though, a player is *always* limited in the amount – and type – of choices that they are allowed to make.

This is, first and foremost, a limitation of the medium; video games simply cannot allow for infinite choices in infinite permutations. However, the *types* of choices that are left to the player still make a statement within the universe of discourse in which the player is participating. For example, *Until Dawn* (Supermassive Games) is a 2015 video game whose selling point was an extremely extensive amount of player choices, based off of the concept of the "butterfly effect." However, there were some players such as Batti (2015), who felt that the amount – and types – of choices the players were offered were limited, or that they were inappropriate. A choice-based game describes, evaluates, and reproduces the real world, just like a linear game does, but it does not always allow for the kinds of choices a player would *like* to make. In sum, a choice-based game is *limited* in the same way that a linear game is – the difference being the *amount* of limitation present, and the amount of "illusion of choice" that is given to the player.

8.1 DEFINING "GAMER"

It is necessary to discuss the term "gamer" as an identifying label. A *New York Times* article states in no uncertain terms what is happening among the population of people who play

games: "Women Who Play Games Shun 'Gamer' Label." (McPhate, 2015) This is objectively

true, not only based upon the numerous sources cited within the article, but also from personal

experience. The 'gamer' label is one that is overwhelmingly associated with heterosexual white

males, yet heterosexual white males do *not* make up the majority of the gaming population (see

section 8.2, Issues of Representation). Furthermore, as the *New York Times* article states, "the

community of [gamers] has become increasingly identified with sexist attitudes among its fringe

members." Because of this, many people – not just women, but other marginalized groups who

are *not* white males – do not self-identify as "gamers," even though they are people who play

video games.

McPhate continues on to state that:

> Some in the gaming community have proposed a shift in the meaning of gamer to be akin to cinephile, a person with a deep knowledge and appreciation of the whole medium. Others have argued that the definition should be broad and, in particular, reflect the wide array of people who play.

> "Marginalized groups have always engaged in gaming," Kishonna Gray, director of the Critical Gaming Lab at Eastern Kentucky University, said in an email. "They just haven't been acknowledged by gaming culture yet and they really aren't catered to."

Here, it is clearly implied that marginalized groups – women, people of color, queer people,

disabled people, and many others – choose to not identify with gamers because they have not

been acknowledged by gaming culture, as well as due to the negative stereotypes that are

associated with the label (which are, too often, proven true). Again, personal experience

corroborates this.

8.2 ISSUES OF REPRESENTATION

  There are many ways in which games present choices to a player; generally, players are free to control their avatars how they wish, within certain gameplay limitations, and limitations of the story-world. Many games – often, role-playing games – allow a player to choose certain aspects of a character, such as species (in fantasy settings such as *Dragon Age*, humans, elves, dwarves, etc.) or background (a war hero, a noble lord, etc.) as well as physical appearance, which is by far the most common aspect of "character creation" offered by a video game. Additionally, if there is a "romance" component in the narrative, the player can choose between several non-player character companions with whom their player character can enter a sexual or romantic relationship, and these companions are often of various genders. In such a choice-based game, players can *choose* what kind of identity to perform. Being able to customize a character's appearance to be similar to player themselves has a significant positive impact on a player's enjoyment of a game (Behr, Reinecke, & Trepte, 2010; Ljungqvist & Svensson 2015), and so it should hold that being able to perform a social identity that is similar to the player *also* has a significant positive impact on the player's enjoyment of a game.

  However, the issue of identifying with an avatar becomes apparent when examining games *without* a choice component, such as the ones in this study. As noted, women make up 44% of the gamer population, and yet female protagonists make up less than 2% of gendered player characters; this issue becomes further compounded when comparing the amount of queer gamers to the amount of queer characters, people of color to characters of color, and so on. According to a 2015 survey the Pew Research Center, 48% of white, non-Hispanic people play video games; 53% of Black, non-Hispanic people play video games; and 51% of Hispanic people

play video games[22]. By contrast, according to a study on gender and racial diversity in recent top-rated video games, "Black and Asian characters each have 3 percent representation in the pool of main protagonists; Latino a mere 1 percent." (Shoemaker 2014) Additionally, according to a 2015 survey by Nielsen, most queer people do not feel that all sexualities are represented in video games, and most Asian-Americans feel underrepresented in video games.

In sum, heterosexual white males are grossly overrepresented in video games, in a way that is hugely disproportionate to the actual population demographics. (Ljungqvist & Svensson 2015) If identification with a player character increases enjoyment of a video game, yet the chances of being able to identify with a player character are so astronomically low for women, people of color, and queer people (and any combination thereof), it can be said that a significant portion of the gamer population has a distinctly *lower* enjoyment of video games. With this in mind, it is necessary to examine the role that identity plays in *identification*; that is to say, the role that the identity of a character plays in the ability of a player to identify with that character.

This study has primarily focused on identity within a given game's story-world; that is to say, identity from the perspective of the story-world as compared to the real world. However, the interplay between in-game story-world identity and real-world player identity is also a significant component of the player's experience, as shown by the statistics above. As has been extensively discussed, the player character is the player's entry point into the game-world. In *Unified Discourse Analysis*, Gee introduces a framework for the discursive analysis of video games:

> 4. What is the avatar?
> 4a. How does the avatar function as an identity?
> 4b. How does the avatar function as a surrogate body?
> 4c. How does the avatar function as a tool-kit?
> (Gee 2015:63-84)

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[22] That is to say, of the white, non-Hispanic people surveyed, 48% play video games, and so on.

Axton, one of the aforementioned player characters from *Borderlands 2,* can be used as an

example to be taken through this framework.

How does the avatar function as an identity?

Axton is from the planet Hieronymous, and served as a sergeant in the Dahl Corporation
military for ten years before being discharged for placing personal glory above orders. He went
AWOL[23] to avoid the punishment of death by firing squad and became a bounty hunter, and
eventually came to Pandora in search of the legendary Vault. Axton is rather arrogant,
overconfident, and a "glory hound," and he embodies many personality traits of both the gun-
slinging bounty hunter and the "anonymous military man" who is commonly the player character
in military shooters such as *Call of Duty*. Axton is bisexual.

How does the avatar function as a surrogate body?

Axton can run, jump, and drive, and as his special skill, he can deploy an automatic turret
to help him on the battlefield for a short amount of time. He can use any type of gun he finds and
hold various kinds of ammunition, and he also has a hatchet that he uses for melee attacks.

How does the avatar function as a tool-kit?

As the game progresses, Axton earns skill points every time he gains a level, and these
skill points can be used to alter the duration, damage, and functionality of his auto-turret. He has
an ECHO device, which functions as a radar, and which allows other characters in the game to
communicate with him. He can purchase items and weapons from vending machines, and
digitally construct vehicles from special kiosks. If Axton is critically wounded, he enters Fight
For Your Life Mode, and can kill an enemy within a short amount of time to be granted a Second
Wind and continue without dying. Axton can also access bounty boards and talk to other people
to find new missions.

As is clearly demonstrated, Axton functions as an identity, as a surrogate body, and as a

tool-kit, allowing the player to experience the story-world of *Borderlands 2* through him in each

of those ways. However, each component of the original framework can be expanded to include

the player as well as the avatar:

> How does the avatar function as an identity *that the player performs while
> playing?*
> How does the avatar function as a surrogate body *for the player to experience the
> game world?*

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[23] "Away without leave," a military term for desertion.

> How does the avatar function as a tool-kit *for the player to use in order to interact with the game world?*

It is no question that the avatar *is* an identity, a surrogate body, and a tool-kit, but what is important is *how* the avatar performs these functions *for the player*. For this study, identity has been the key function of the avatar; that is to say, identity within the story-world. However, the way that this identity maps onto the player's identity (and vice-versa) is equally as important as what a character's identity *is*.

A game with a static player character – that is to say, without any customization options for a character, and with no dialogue or narrative choices for the player to make – *requires* the player to perform the identity of such a static player character in order to play the game. To reiterate what has already been said on the topic of player identification, a player's enjoyment of a game is shown to be greater when a player identifies with their avatar, but the diversity in identities of player characters does *not* correlate with the diversity of identities with players themselves. As stated, the vast majority of player characters are *male*, even though roughly half of the gaming population is *not*. From personal experience, these male player characters also, overwhelmingly, tend to be white and heterosexual. This places the "straight white male" identity in a position of great importance within game-worlds – *evaluating* it as the type of person worthy of being a player character, and *reproducing* Western cultural hegemony within the story-world. Any player who is not a straight white male – that is to say, the majority of players – is more often than not forced to perform an identity other than their own when playing a video game.

However, a game with no choice in dialogue and no narrative-altering options allows the player to perform the identities of non-heterosexual, non-male player characters. Games with highly customizable player characters allow players with hegemonic real-life identities to play

those out in game worlds as well, but in a game with no such choices, such as the *Borderlands* series, a player *must* perform such a "non-hegemonic" identity. Though the *Borderlands* series allows choice between player characters, the options are surprisingly diverse compared to the white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied male characters that dominate the gaming industry. Athena and Maya are queer women[24]; Axton is a bisexual man; Wilhelm and Gaige (a woman) have physical disabilities and use prosthetics; Aurelia and Nisha are women of color; Roland, Salvador, and Mordecai are men of color; Lilith is a woman; Zer0 is agender. This leaves only two other player characters in the *entire series* that have "hegemonic" white male identities – though even so, neither of the remaining two are completely "hegemonic," as one is grudgingly a body double for the series' main antagonist, and the other has been driven to insanity.

   Halo 2 and *Halo 5: Guardians* (343 Industries, 2015) feature a variation on this theme: there are two player characters, and the game will switch the player between them depending on which story mission is being played.

Halo 2 **level**	**Player character**	*Halo 5: Guardians* **level**	**Player character**
The Heretic	*(cinematic cutscene)*	*Osiris*	Jameson Locke
The Armory	Master Chief	*Blue Team*	Master Chief
Cairo Station	Master Chief	*Glassed*	Jameson Locke
Outskirts	Master Chief	*Meridian Station*	Jameson Locke
Metropolis	Master Chief	*Unconfirmed*	Jameson Locke
The Arbiter	The Arbiter	*Evacuation*	Jameson Locke
The Oracle	The Arbiter	*Reunion*	Master Chief
Delta Halo	Master Chief	*Swords of Sanghelios*	Jameson Locke

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[24] Maya is asexual; Athena's sexuality is not explicitly stated, but she is in a relationship with a woman.

Regret	Master Chief	*Alliance*	Jameson Locke
Sacred Icon	The Arbiter	*Enemy Lines*	Jameson Locke
Quarantine Zone	The Arbiter	*Before the Storm*	Jameson Locke
Gravemind	Master Chief	*Battle of Sunaion*	Jameson Locke
Uprising	The Arbiter	*Genesis*	Jameson Locke
High Charity	Master Chief	*The Breaking*	Master Chief
The Great Journey	The Arbiter	*Guardians*	Jameson Locke

Fig. 8 – A table showing the distribution of player characters per mission in *Halo 2* and *Halo 5: Guardians.*

In *Halo 2*, the player switches between playing as the Master Chief, as in *Halo: Combat Evolved*, and The Arbiter, a member of the alien race that had been serving as the antagonistic force in *Combat Evolved*. While this provides interesting thematic synergy and a new point of view for the series, the Arbiter, as an alien, is not a particular example of a "non-hegemonic" player character.

However, *Halo 2* does pave the way for a similar split in *Halo 5: Guardians*, as can be seen; Jameson Locke, the primary player character in *Halo 5: Guardians*, is a Black man. This deviation from the norm – specifically, the *white* norm – is one that the player has *no choice* in whatsoever, and places Locke at the same level of importance to the story-world as other player characters. With 13 out of 15 missions assigned to him, *Halo 5: Guardians* places Locke at a level of *more* importance than the Master Chief, who has been the face of the *Halo* franchise since its inception. Master Chief, as discussed, was created to be a nameless, faceless character upon whom the players could project, but Locke is *not*. Locke's identity While Locke's role as a toolkit and a surrogate body are more or less the same as the Master Chief's (i.e., both can run, jump, shoot, etc.), it is his identity as a Black man, as a former Black Ops soldier, and as a

determined and dedicated fighter is the identity that sets him apart from the Master Chief and other similar "fill-in-the-blank" avatars.

Games are social texts in the sense that they require social literacies, but they are also social texts in the sense that they themselves are indexical – to once more reiterate Duranti's definition of indexicality, language is "a tool through which our social and cultural world is constantly described, evaluated, and reproduced." Video games (like other media) are *also* tools through which we describe, evaluate, and reproduce our social and cultural worlds, including when societal norms are upheld or broken. When societal norms are broken, this can be done in such a way that *subverts* these hegemonic norms; that is to say, the breaking of societal norms can be used to provide a commentary on an aspect or aspects of society (or of gamer culture) that the storyteller – in this case, the game developer – deems necessary or relevant. In terms of indexicality, it is important that video games *are* indexical with regards to the real world matrix culture; that is to say, it is important that video games connect to the real world. It is equally important *how* they are indexical – *how* they describe, evaluate, and reproduce the real world – because the players who experience these narratives and identities are real people who exist in the real world and who are affected by the media they consume.

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Vita

Barbara Anna Jedruszczak (Basia) was born in Anaheim, California, and spent most of her young adulthood, including high school, in Orange County. She was inspired to choose linguistics as her major at the University of California, Davis, because of two events: firstly, she enrolled in French alongside Spanish, and was intensely curious as to why the two languages are so similar. Secondly, after hearing a story about how linguists are supposedly able to recognize where someone is from purely based on their speech, she decided that this was a skill she needed to learn.

While at UC Davis, Basia discovered her passion for sociolinguistics, and specifically for social and regional dialects. After earning her Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics with a minor in English Literature at UC Davis, she began the Linguistic Studies Program at Syracuse University in pursuit of her master's degree. During this time, she began to realize that her love for sociolinguistics and her love for video games and online communities could be brought together as a part of her academic pursuits, and she explored online speech in several papers before taking a much deeper look at the roles that language plays in video games. Her personal interests in the intersect between language and video games also include how language is used for world-building through conlangs, and how regional and social language varieties are represented in video games.