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EMERGENT NARRATIVE: STORIES OF PLAY, PLAYING WITH STORIES

by

ERIC MURNANE
B.A. McNeese State University, 2011
M.A. McNeese State University, 2014

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ABSTRACT

Emergent narrative, a phenomenon of unexpected contextual stories arising through play, has been researched in the field of game studies since 1999. However, that discussion largely lies in the realm of theoretical stories which are generated by either the system or the player. The purpose of this dissertation is to deepen our understanding of emergent narrative by examining real-world examples of the phenomenon. Four hundred player posts were gathered from forums relating to the video game *Skyrim* (a large, open world fantasy roleplaying game) and analyzed using a mixed-method framework which is informed by digital ethnography, fan studies, and game studies. Using a cluster sampling method, the posts were divided into categories based on theme. This work outlines the historical trajectory of the term emergent narrative and proposes that player created emergent narratives are novel as they capitalize on random events during play in order to create stories which are both contextual and surprising. Each chapter explores a different kind of storytelling in one hundred of the posts, showcasing the diverse subjects that players explore. This work demonstrates that upon reflection, players are not passive recipients of information from games. By participating in these online activities, players become cocreators of their own stories. This work expands our understanding of players, interactive systems, and narrative by arguing that the act of play is collaborative rather than receptive.

Keywords: Emergent Narrative, Video Games, Storytelling, Player Character, Heroics, Death, Glitch, Rule System, Digital Ethnography, Game Studies, Fan Studies

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PREFACE

I want to tell you a story. By the end of this dissertation, you will have read dozens of them, and in preparation, I read hundreds. However, for the moment, one will suffice. There was a young woman who arrived in a foreign land. The locals were often hostile, but she was met with just enough kindness from a few folks that she did not turn tail and flee from this new place. In her time, this young woman slayed monsters and brokered peace. She found love and suffered tragedy. By the end, she was wiser, stronger, and in her later days, she imparted her wisdom and lent her strength. This story, which I will come back to, is the tale of my character in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. We love stories, and we have since the very beginning. Campbell tells us that "[t]he happy ending of the fairy tale, the myth, and the divine comedy of the soul is to be read, not as a contradiction, but as a transcendence of the universal tragedy of man" (21). At its core, we have been telling stories from the very beginning because at some deep level, we need them. These tales have, since ancient times, given humanity an outlet for their frustrations and innermost desires.

There has been much said about stories, so I expect that my contribution will be somewhat humble. I will be discussing the kinds of stories that players tell about video games. More specifically, I will be looking at stories that players of *Skyrim* chose to share on discussion forums. Even through such a small window, there is much to see. Players on these forums discuss a broad range of themes that run the gamut of human experience. Over the course of this dissertation, I will examine stories of identity, heroics, death, and rule breaking. I will not be doing this by examining the stories that *Skyrim* told to the players. The game's story is quite complex and immersive, and I do recommend playing it. However, there is a litany of research on this topic already. There is not, on the other hand, much research in the area of players telling

their own stories of in-game experiences. These are the stories about which I am interested. When the roles reverse, when the player becomes storyteller and new tales are spun from old material, this is called emergent narrative. This is where my interests lie.

CHAPTER 1: THE STORIES WE PLAY AND THE GAMES WE TELL

"It's always a story. Everything is a story." –Abed Nadir

This dissertation sets out to establish an understanding of storytelling in video games. More specifically, this project aims to lay out a framework for how players tell their own stories based on what they have experienced in the game, but that the game does not appear to be tracking. While there will be a more formal definition later in this chapter, the above discussion describes a phenomenon known as emergent narrative. However, the present problem lies squarely in what words mean when we talk about digital games. Before I get too deep in any discussion, it will be fruitful to take some time and explain exactly what I mean when I say "video game," "narrative/story," and "player." These are all words that seem fairly straight forward. However, scholars in the field have spent the last twenty years arguing about what these words mean, and it is therefore useful to take a moment and dig into each of them.

Video Game

Let us start with a common-sense definition of this term. Video implies that electricity is probably being used and the information is likely entering through the eyes. Game implies that someone is doing the playing and that there is some kind of object with which said person will be interacting. Even a passing familiarity with the discussion of game studies reveals that this definition will ruffle the feathers of ludologists, who are concerned with a configured rule system (Eskelinen), as well as narratologists who are principally concerned with the ways that the form tells stories (Wesp). However, part of this contention comes from the way that we have been

defining video game since the very beginning. Arjoranta notes that "The choice of emphasis usually depends on the reasons for making a certain definition, and these reasons may be more interesting or enlightening than the definition itself." Here, we see that any time we are defining a particular term, we are doing so with an agenda in mind. Walther complicates this, noting that "our observations are entangled in our very understanding of what is observed." Complicating matters further, our discussion of games confounds several terms: Digital games, computer games, electronic games, and video games. All of this is to say that the landscape surrounding the definition of game is contested.

I therefore define "video game" with these concerns in mind. Karhulathis postulates "there is no noteworthy difference in usage between 'videogame,' 'digital game,' 'electronic game' and 'computer game.'" I am inclined to agree. While there is difference in interface, the core experience (as will be demonstrated below) remains the same. Thus, I will primarily be using the term video game throughout this work. In particular, when I use video game, I recognize that it is tied to the act of play. I simultaneously recognize that any definition I select will not make everyone happy. Moreover, I recognize that such a definition does need to be based upon something. Arjoranta, pulling from Widdenstein's work on definitions, suggests that "family resemblances" is a good place to start. This approach asks that we approach a term based on what we already recognize within in. I thus begin my definition with video games being a genre of representation. Like cinema, they ask the invested party to understand what is being portrayed. Like red rover, they ask the person to participate. Like a puzzle, they have a set of actions that can be done and a set which cannot. Like a novel, they can be stopped and started at the discretion of a person. Like a piece of accounting software, it has rules that allow things to be done. The video game contains elements from all of these things, but it is

simultaneously something else. For my purposes, a video game is a system which requires a user, and that system allows said user to work towards a particular goal. My discussion here will be telling a story based on the experiences of playing, but this is by no means the only thing a game can do.

Narrative/Story

Before getting to the definition, this point bares emphasis. Not all games are setting out to tell stories, and this is fine. The focus of this work is to examine stories, and therefore my examples will center on situations where stories occur. This line of reasoning is meant to inoculate against any possible assertion that I am here trying to impose a narrative on *Pong*. I am not. Now, on to definitions. Narrative and story are not necessarily the same thing, but they are at the very least siblings. Both narrative and story set out to out forward events. They are not media-dependent terms. Ryan explains "The narrativity of a text is located on the level of the signified. Narrativity should therefore be defined in semantic terms. The definition should be medium-free." By setting up the concept on the level of semiotics, Ryan is showcasing this phenomenon on the level of idea. Thus, a story is a set of events which occur in a particular order. In video games, these are the eventualities of play. DeMarle posits that "game writers are co-writing stories with people they never meet: the players" (71). This is where I plant my flag. When a player experiences a game, that particular series of events represents a story. Narrative, on the other hand, is a bit bigger than story. Mukherjee describes narratives as "overlapping and there is both difference and repetition amongst the countless potential or actualised trajectories" (133). The nature of narrative is the possibility space. It contains the meaning of possible outcomes and interpretations. When comparing narrative and story, a square-rectangle

dichotomy is useful. The story is finite. This happened, and it means the following things. Narratives are open. They are the potential outcomes. Just as importantly, they are the possible interpretations. This distinction between story and narrative runs the risk of becoming murky, so an example is useful. A person goes to the store and a rude individual runs over their foot with the cart. This is a story. The meaning is baked in. Obviously, we know who the correct party is. This is because the elements are interpreted. However, before that person walked into that market, numerous possible narratives existed, waiting to be realized. Just as importantly, when the cart hits the foot, what this encounter means is also narrative. The principle distinction lies in whether this one event is set in stone.

The Player

This is perhaps the easiest to define in a vacuum. The player is the person who interacts with the game. They hold the controller, tap the keyboard. The player makes decisions about what happens in the game. It is only when the player meaningfully comes in contact with the other elements defined here that the matter becomes more complicated. When the player uses a video game, they aim to make things on the screen happen. Squire points out that "the player begins with small, relatively easy challenges, which are paced to produce automaticity" (648). This places the focus on the interaction. Video games function as a feedback mechanism for the player. The narrative becomes similarly complicated the moment a player is introduced. Kücklich explains that "It is only through the player's investment of belief into that world that the game-simulation becomes a fictional world that can be inhabited and explored by the player" (102). The player enters this world, builds it, and the narrative possibilities become the player

story. Thus, the player, in this work, is the individual who receives feedback form the game and tells the story.

What This Work Accomplishes

Broadly, this project looks at the intersection of games, the player, and narrative. The artifact of principle interest is the player story. As an object, player stories are the moment that players take the narrative possibilities and narrow them down to individual stories. The result of this comes from playing the game and encountering situations for which the game has not prepared and is not tracking. Occasionally, those stories represent moments in which something has occurred through play for which neither the player nor the system accounts. These emergent narratives represent player creativity in ways that are heretofore underdiscussed in terms of the player. Thus, I will here outline my overall approach for gathering and interpreting player stories. By combining digital ethnography and reader response, this dissertation focuses on the kinds of stories that players tell well and provides a framework for better understanding emergent narrative. I will be addressing the following questions throughout my work:

- What kinds of emergent narratives are players sharing?
- What do players value when they share stories about their characters?
- What do players value when they share stories about their actions in game?

My selection of subject stems largely from what I perceive to be a gap in the conversation. Within the field of game studies, much has been said about the nature of narrative in games. Even the subject of emergent narrative has had considerable attention. However, almost universally, this discussion focuses on games in the abstract or the individual experiences of the author of that piece.

Simply put, there has not been a concrete analysis of the kinds of stories that players tell about their play sessions with a direct focus on the emergent aspects of them from the field of game studies or human-computer interaction. For example, when Mukherjee is talking about the stories in *BioShock,* something he often does to support his larger ideas about narrative in games, he inevitably returns to the stories which emerged when he was playing the game (133). He describes his experiences with agency upon encountering "Little Sisters" throughout the game, and the decision to spare them. This setup provides the reader with context for what was happening in the moment as well as a larger framework for how decisions such as this matter when discussing narrative in games. He is taking his own choices as a possibility for the player when going through a game. Certainly, his overall discussion becomes more nuanced (as will be discussed later), but like much of the scholarship about narratives in games, Mukherjee focuses on the possibilities instead of the eventualities which arise from that network of options. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with this approach. It is a truly effective way to ground discussions of theory, and I will certainly do so in this text. Such issues frame our understanding of narrative in games, but they do not necessarily get to the heart of how or why players create stories within games. I contend that if this is the only way that we contextualize the theories in game studies, then we necessarily will miss something.

Methodology

The purpose of this project is principally to understand the stories being told by players. Thus, my data collection focuses on gathering information and interpreting it in a manner that is charitable to the player as well as insightful to the study of narrative in games. The inquiry is inherently qualitative, examining stories as whole units with meaning tied to them. It is with this

in mind that this dissertation employs a mixed methods approach, drawing on digital ethnography as a tool to gather data and reader response as a tool to make meaning of that information.

One of the key informants for this inquiry is digital ethnography which has a clear focus on the player and experiences in game. Murthy explains that digital ethnography, in practice, is a researcher visiting a digital field site and collecting observations (139). In practice, this is a method for collecting data, and in my own case, the field sites were the forums where players shared their stories. The posts and data collections sites were selected using two-phase sampling as outlined by Thompson (183). In the first phase, I visited forums broadly discussing topics on the game *Skyrim* in order to "eyeball" (183) what material players were discussing. After getting an impression of the themes which appeared most prevalent, I moved into the second phase, a cluster sampling of posts based on those narrative themes. All told, a total of four hundred posts were sampled, with each of the following clusters representing one hundred posts: character, heroics, death, and glitches. When collecting information from the forums, Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor explain that "A basic principle of ethnographic research is that we should take our lead from our informants, following them to wherever they engage in relevant activity. As part of this process, we need to archive data about places beyond the platform" (118-9). In my own case, the platform is the game itself whereas the forums represent the relevant activity occurs. Boeelstroff et al. note that "the internet is transient" (119), and I therefore have taken steps to preserve posts in their entirety. By collecting player stories in their complete form, this dissertation ultimately is able make connections between posts as well as consider the factors within the medium which fostered their creation in the first place.

In analyzing the posts which I have found, I am implementing reader response criticism for video games, as outlined by Bogost. He notes that in reader response, "the meaning of the text is a production of the reader, not the text, even if the text can 'constrain' that reading" (129). In essence, the posts are put on the forums for the reader's consideration, and meaning can then be extracted from them. Bogost is ultimately applying a long tradition of theoretical criticism here. Reader response originates in literary criticism of the 1970s. As one of the pioneers of this approach, Fish notes the following:

> The category of response includes any and all of the activities provoked by a string of words: the projection of syntactical and/or lexical probabilities; their subsequent occurrence or non-occurrence; attitudes towards persons, or things, or ideas referred to; the reversal or questioning of those attitude (127).

Ultimately, Fish is outlining the kinds of work that one can do with such a method. The reader can pay attention to words as they occur in a given context. Of import are not just individual words, but the lexical units around them, the frequency with which they are used and the manner that multiple strings come together. Because much of the work in this dissertation means to make sense out of context with respect to player questions, my own choice to use reader response serves as a commitment to the words that players produce rather than an analysis of individual players. This school of criticism is not without its detractors. Gauthier, in the tellingly named "Narcissus in the Classroom" critiques that reader response "consistently strips away the formal features of artwork and awards them to the audience, locating beauty in the eye of the beholder" (244). This refrain mirrors the longtime criticism that reader response makes the act of criticism subjective. However, these complaints miss the point. Reader response is not an 'anything goes' form of reading. The reader is responsible for finding evidence in the text

in order to justify a particular interpretation. Given that little to no information is available about the authors when examining discussion post, the text is the beginning and end in terms of what one can know about these player stories. Moreover, the fact that this school of thought raises up the prestige of a group that has long been undervalued in the discussion of narrative in games serves as a even more reason to use this approach.

This is a significant step for how player stories create meaning. Essentially, "the text provides controls for the reader's experience, like signposts, but leaves 'gaps' that the reader must fill in" (Bogost 129). This approach is useful because it removes the notion of authorial intent, placing the emphasis on the text as an object. Thus, experiences shared on the forums can be interpreted without making sweeping statements about the player (as though this were one monolithic entity). Additionally, Bogost notes that the act of play brings with it numerous experiences. He says, "the value of his experience comes directly from his willingness to allow the multiple subjective experiences of the simulation's rules play against one another" (133). When interpreting player stories, I will be making arguments about what these stories mean and how they impact the notion of emergent narrative. However, the evidence will always be present in those stories, and the interpretations will serve as examples of how these individual stories comment on the larger phenomenon of narrative in games.

As noted above, A total of four hundred posts were selected for analysis. Upon initial entry into the forums, threads were selected for the first stage based on which had the largest numbers of participants, with me making notes about what I found. Using an Excel spreadsheet, I noted individual elements of the posts. After reflecting on what these initial set of posts showcased, I noted that posts could be arranged thematically. Drawing on reader response critique, I began sorting the initial posts into the categories of character profiles, hero stories,

death, and glitches. These constructs are of course artificial, but they served as valuable framing apparatus when I gathered the remaining posts. To be clear, because I am describing the habits of players telling stories about games in a forum, any categorization schema which both focused on narrative and was faithful to what the players were saying would have worked. What is important is where this information takes us. Using thematic analysis, as outlined by Guest, MacQueen, and Namey, I assigned structural codes (58) to individual posts, organizing the data into more manageable units. From there, I was able to establish themes, what the data are about (65). In each of the subsequent chapters, I explore the emergent themes as they occur within the individual clusters.

Thus, between the two approaches, there is an analysis that is rooted firmly in game studies theory and informed by the methods of digital ethnographers. In preparing this text, my approach was to use the methods of digital ethnography to inform my data collection while using the theories of game studies to root my findings in the conversation which has been going on for decades. This fusion allows me not only to bridge the gap between the two approaches but to also arrive at conclusions that might have otherwise been missed.

By uniting these two schools of thought, I have been able to examine emergent narrative in single player games in a way that has not yet been done in a project of this scale. To put it another way, there is a form of storytelling that is heretofore understudied.

What I Am Looking for

Over the course of this text, I will be looking closely at the stories that players share about *Skyrim*. I began with a simple question. *What kinds of emergent narratives are players sharing?* While this question is broad, it does serve as an overarching unifier for the more

specific areas of interest that I have for this inquiry. This was a useful starting place. Beginning with a broad approach allowed me to gather diverse kinds of player stories before arriving at a judgement about what they mean. It was with this in mind that I took to the discussion boards. The sheer volume of posts that I found inspired confidence. There are thousands of threads and tens of thousands of posts. I was looking into something that players cared about. Once I had spent a bit of time looking over what the players were saying, I was able to refine my question. Two things stuck out for me. Players' stories tended to fall into one of two categories. What actions the player took in the game, and how their character would react to the game itself. This lead to a refinement of my inquiry and the following questions:

What Do Players Value When They Share Stories about Their Characters?

As the character is the entry point for a game such as *Skyrim*, I will place value on the ways that players describe their characters. Meadows describes a person's avatar as "an interactive social representation of a user" (23). This language is useful in informing my own research. Essentially, describing one's character can be seen as describing one's values for two reasons. 1. The character is created by the player. We can therefore learn about the player based on the choices that he/she makes. Belk notes that the self in these digital spaces is "co-constructed" (490), indicating that player identity, while not dependent on avatar, is at the very least a factor in the construction. Of importance, Ducheneaut, Wen, Yee, and Wadley found that physical appearance is an important part of this process. This notion that idealized avatars represent something for the player is worth discussing in detail. While it is not the case that these details are carbon copies of the players' actual selves, the details they do share are worth exploring. 2. The player chooses to share details about the character online. We can therefore

assume that the player wants these carefully selected details to be seen. If the players are inhabiting the character which they play, I can learn about the players by their choices. Juxtaposed against this is Shaw's view of identification. She explains, "Interviewees needed to see a game character as a distinct entity from themselves in order to feel as though they could identify with it" (79). This is an important distinction. Players have the capability to commit grievous acts within a game such as *Skyrim*. The Dark Brotherhood questline alone asks the player to commit numerous murders. This in no way implies that a player internalizes the murders. Shaw's point here is that identification occurs through a process involving othering of the nonplayer character. Even if players are not internalizing the details of play, it becomes clear that players are telling something about themselves when they choose to share these details. By analyzing the stories that players tell about their avatars, we can ultimately better understand them. Scholars have referred to this kind of play in which the player dons the role of another (especially a marginalized group) as identity tourism. McDonald notes the potential harmful effects of such behavior in MMO games as there are social consequences when interacting with real people. However, in single player games where the interaction are strictly with NPCs (Nonplayer Characters), she notes that "identity tourism could actually become a healthy and positive form of exploration, resulting in greater self-awareness and confidence in players" (26). Framing the play experience as a kind of exploration with real consequences for the player is one way to contextualize the emergent narrative and forefront the notion that players are being conscientious when they are creating such stories.

This creates a fascinating paradox. One the one hand, players decide what their characters do, what they think as evidenced by Meadows. On the other, they recognize that a character in a game is a distinct entity as Shaw demonstrates. This is an easy distinction to make

in a game where the player is inhabiting a character created by a game designer. However, when they player is both the architect and the participant, the player has a kind of meta-awareness of the character. At once, the player recognizes that the character is a distinct, unique entity (allowing for identification) and that said character represents him/her in the game world. Thus, when a player shares details about his/her character's inner life, the details are nuanced and well worth the careful attention that I will here be paying.

What Do Players Value When They Share Stories about Their Actions in Game?

The traditional view of stories as something static which can be analyzed and certainly can be reinterpreted is a useful way to think about them in general. However, in analyzing these stories that players create, Mukherjee's approach which situates the player as coauthor is useful. He explains, "Each gameplay instance is therefore an actualisation of the virtual multiplicity that digital-game time is, in general (137). To get a bit deeper into this, Mukherjee is describing the possibility space of games. There is what the player experiences in the moment compared to the numerous possible things he/she could be experiencing. Boluk and Lemieux describe it as "the singularity of each engagement as past playthroughs vanish, disappearing in time" (176). Though the possibility space is massive, the player necessarily experiences it in the singularity of this play session. This is the same distinction I am drawing between story and narrative. This discussion of game-story concedes that there is the framework of story in place within games (the imposed narrative). However, Mukherjee resituates the emergent narrative to a position of power. In this sense, the emergent narrative is just as valid as the imposed narrative. It is, however, infinitely variable in its appearance. Thus, in my own work, I will treat the player as author when they create these stories. This will allow me the leeway to analyze the player stories

more simply as stories. When a player is recounting what he/she did during a play experience in a game such as *Skyrim*, the details which they select are interesting because the player selected them out of all the possible interactions which happened in that play section. This selection process is part of what makes them stories rather than a simple list of activities. When analyzing these stories, I am interested in how these events come together to make a narrative. I therefore pay special attention to figuring out the why of it all. Why did they pair these two events together out of the myriad choices they had? What can be learned about the player's perception of the gameworld by these choices? To be clear, this approach, being rooted in reader-response as outlined by Bogost, is based entirely on reading what is on the page. The details selected by the player matter because they were selected. Using this approach will allow me to get the heart of messages that players send when they create such stories. Thus, I use textual analysis to understand the players better through the stories that they choose to tell.

The Story of Narrative in Games

In setting up a discussion of emergent narratives in games as well as stories in games in the more general sense, it is important to set up the larger environment in which this conversation takes place. There has been considerable scholarly attention paid to the intersection of the player/user/reader and story. Very early in the conversation, Murray notes, "The computer is chameleonic. It can be seen as a theater, a town hall, an unraveling book, an animated wonderland, a sports arena, and even a potential life form" (284). She is exploring the possibility of games as a vehicle of representation. Thus, the world of video games is not just one place. It does not simply lend itself to one kind of story. In the same vein, Aaseth asks "why should not a text, rather than function as a strict category, behave textually—in the

Barthesian sense—and rewrite itself at every opportunity" (41). This openness to the possibilities of story to be rewritten and imagined in new ways represents one of the key reasons video games are so appealing in the first place. Mukherjee similarly explains that "The game narrative is, therefore, not rigid and readable in any one way" (106). This understanding of the readability and textuality of games as complex and changing allows considerably more freedom when performing reader response on both games and players. In situating the player within a system, Gee notes that "narrative based games involve players making decisions and taking actions whose results they must assess to prepare for future action towards their goals" (355). This is an important distinction to make. When taken together, these interpretations form the backbone of how I understand the formation of narrative in games. The narratives are open in the sense that the player realizes particular stories through play. The player has the ability to take actions within the space of a game. For my own purposes, that ability to make choices within a game is important. If it is possible for the player to truly act within a game of his or her own accord, then it is the case that the emergent narrative has space to emerge.

Perhaps closely related to the notion of story in games is the discussion of agency: what the player can do to influence the story. Here, I lay out the conversation surrounding agency, exploring the extremes of the definition and moving the conversation closer to my own conception of the term. This simple understanding of agency is useful in identifying an area of research, but it does little work in practice. Thus, it is important to examine the ways that agency has been discussed in the past, as my own concept of agency lies somewhere in the center of many of these authors. Saklofske posits that one can only have freedom to act in the game if they are somehow above the narrative, a spectator (145). In this approach, narrative is the enemy of agency. This is perhaps one of the least open definitions of the term. By this conception, the

player does not ever really have a choice, a belief that is at odds with the work here. Moving more closely to a truer feeling of choice, Cheng notes the importance of experience (18). To truly have a choice in a game has less to do with the options being offered than it does with the feeling that choices have been offered. Expanding on this, Tulloch explains that "Video games work by constructing the player's subjectivity; they produce specific understanding, expectations and desires in the player, so that the player freely performs in the way necessary. Choice and obedience are never mutually exclusive" (36). By this logic, choice is a subjective matter. We can understand choice here as something that the system creates and the player either accepts or rejects.

Montford examines how well a player's identity meshes with the identity of the character (139). In Montford's experience, the character in the game is often just a body for the player to inhabit. Thus, the will of that player is more important than the internal motivations of the character. While I am somewhat reserved about the player being unconcerned with what the character wants (I certainly consider it when I play games), I will admit that the character certainly could not stop me from going against its wishes. Kücklich explores how players handle resistance put up by the game (102). For Kücklich, the willing suspension of disbelief is an important part of a player becoming invested in a game fiction. A third possibility is presented by Squire with his chainsaw model in which "the player iteratively develops goals, takes an action, experiences feedback on that action, and shifts goals and actions accordingly" (648). This approach is system level and design-centric. The player reacts to the system and improves his/her approach over time. Perhaps as a middle ground between these approaches, Ip analyzes how gameplay interventions by either the player or the game affect the story (219). This middle approach to agency, where the player and the game work in tandem during the play experience

most clearly represents the manner that I couch my own dealings with narrative in games. Delving deeper into the nature of choice in games, Harrell discusses the degree to which players can be said to have free will in creating their own stories within games (261). For Harrell, agency and freewill are synonymous. One can therefore only be said to have agency if they can make a choice with consequences in a game.

However, when scholars are examining agency, they are principally focused on moments of choice provided to the player by the system. Essentially, the scholarship largely focuses on what *can* be done in a given moment, not what is done. Other studies focus on whether the player perceives having agency (Thue et al.), but the focus is still in not chronicling what that agency looks like in practice. This is complex and has led to a wealth of useful scholarly discussion, but it does not really address what I am looking for. I am thinking about how the player acts in the moment, how they interact with the environment in a way that is ephemeral. Thus, my focus on emergent narrative. At its core, emergent narrative is a story that arises at a fixed temporal moment. Even if it has occurred before, for the player, this narrative feels new, personal.

Explaining Emergent Narrative

Having explored the concepts which inform the creation of narrative in digital games, it is now prudent to establish a firm definition of emergent narrative. I begin with a historical discussion of the term "emergent narrative," briefly demonstrating how the field has arrived at the current conceptions of the term. The discussion of emergent narrative in games began in the late Twentieth Century. In 1999, Ruth Aylett introduced the concept of the emergent narrative. Her initial concerns revolved around the player providing "appropriate behavior" in a simulated

system (86). Ayelett's conception of emergence largely revolved around the design of systems which would spontaneously generate narratives based on the input of a user. In the nearly two decades since she introduced the term, the discussion of emergent narratives has split in two directions. The first, sticking more closely with Aylett's original conception, is what I am calling design of emergent systems. This is perhaps best surmised by one of the latest examples from 2013. Suttie, Louchart, Aylett, and Lim describe emergent narrative systems as "highly complex software artefacts. They include characters equipped with sophisticated Artificial Intelligence algorithms, dynamic story world representations, and high level Drama Management concerns." (210). The second, more of an offshoot, is what I am calling player created emergence. This is concisely expressed by Brand and Knight in 2005 when they describe emergent narrative as a phenomenon controlled by the player, saying "Emergent Narrative occurs when the player imagines or 'authors' the story by playing in a world she actively constructs" (4). I will discuss each in turn below.

Design of Emergent Systems

If there is a practice for which emergent systems are the heir apparent, tabletop games are a likely contender. In such games, players are able to take any actions (which is deemed possible) and therefore the ability of truly unexpected narrative possibility is high. Dormans describes the gatekeeper of these stories, saying, "The gamemaster is in control of the game. She describes the setting, judges the effects of the actions of the player-character, applies the rules and plays the role of all characters that are not controlled by the players." In this sense, the "system" which enacts and controls the rules of the game is a person. He/she creates the monsters, sets the terms of the encounter, and controls how the outcome affects the players.

Certainly, this game master is constrained in that the game has rules, but they are also the arbiter of those rules. Assuming that this GM is creative, the possibilities for what can happen in a play session are limitless. The gold standard in designing an emergent system would ultimately be to replicate this experience using a computer system. In 2004, Louchart and Aylett imagined an artificial intelligence system in the form of a game master. They explain:

> The GM could be defined as a human and/or computer arbiter in charge of managing the narrative and its interests by making decisions regarding the introduction of new characters, the exact outcome of actions carried out by characters, the content of the world or, the events taking place in the frame of the game. The scenarios are then written consecutively, one by one, as the game is conducted. (515-6)

Taking cues from tabletop games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, this GM would be a feedback system which creates new experiences for the user based on information that it knows about the game session. Expanding upon this, Aylett, Louchart, Dias, Paica, and Vala, in 2005, imagine this as a "bottom up" which uses agents within the system to manage output. This concept was further discussed by Alvarez-Napagao, Gomez-Sebasti, Panagiotidi, Tejeda-Gomez, Oliva, and Vazquez-Salceda, in 2011 when they noted that characters of this kind should be created with a bias towards emotionally impactful moments (2). In essence, the characters in the game would meaningfully react to choices made by the player, thus allowing new stories to be created.

The outcome of this research was always meant to be a system which could produce potentially limitless new stories simply by interacting with the player. Of course, this was not without its challenges. Kriegel and Aylett, in 2008, explain that in order to create such a system, authors would need to 'let go' of specific story lines altogether and to focus on creating the elements from which the story will emerge." Essentially, the goal of designing emergent systems had become not story creation, but creation of the possibility of story. Louchart,

Swartjes, Kriegel, and Aylett, in 2008, note that "the author can enjoy a certain freedom from general concerns on interaction, contextualization or continuity." In 2010, Swartjes explores this conception further, explaining that the type of stories which are potentially possible are "'implied' by generative models" (188). Essentially, if the author cannot predict what stories will emerge, then it is best if the author not be concerned with how the individual narratives created fit together. This concept of emergent narrative is decidedly design-centric. The implied audience is people who make video games and wish to create a narrative experience for their audiences.

Player Created Emergence

Just as with the previous conception, Aylett first introduced the concept of player created emergence. In 2000, she noted that "emergent narrative is essentially physically and temporally contingent: it happens in a specified place and time frame." Almost certainly, she was considering this from a design standpoint, but the implications from a player's standpoint are interesting nonetheless. Player created emergence only happens in a moment. It is a pas de deux between the system and player. Louchart and Aylett, in 2004, describe this story as being "articulated around the person delivering the story, and the person receiving the story" (513). Getting deeper into how this phenomenon functions, Arsenault, in 2005, pointed out that "[e]mergence is characterized by a simple set of rules leading to complex, often unforeseeable consequences" (6). Unlike the previous conception of emergence, player created emergence hinges on random chance. It is not the responsibility of the designer to plan for possible interactions. Rather, these events occur serendipitously in the moment.

An important part of this conception is context. With player created emergence, events do not occur in a vacuum. They are necessarily colored by what transpired before. In their 2007 discussion of how emergence can be understood through improvisational theatre, Swartjes and Vromen say, "When there is a coemergence of events and their cause, a lot of flexibility is added to the emergent development of stories" (149). Looking at stories this way allows for new, perhaps unrelated events to be contextualized with previous information. The cause of an event is only understood as it transpires, and only by the choices which led to that moment. Continuing the improvisational theatre discussion of emergence in 2008, Swartjes, Kruizinga, and Theune make it clear that players frame the story as they go "continually adding new information by the things they say and do." This additive form of storytelling is part of what makes player created emergence flexible. Details from the past are constantly at play, just waiting for the player to make a connection. Walsh, in 2011, calls this process "reciprocal and recursive" (83). In this way, player created emergence is not something that a system is doing by design. Rather the player is experiencing details that the system does not correlate and giving them new meaning. In 2015, Ryan, Mateas, and Wardrip-Fruin, articulate this directly. They say:

> [S]ystems from which narratives emerge are typically unable to discern those narratives from the uninteresting event sequences that more commonly appear. When this happens, emergent stories may not get showcased by the system, and in turn they may go unnoticed by the player. (9)

It is this exact issue that draws my attention. If players may often miss the emergent narratives which arise through their own play, then I here aspire to capture the moments when a player did notice.

Why Skyrim?

To be clear, there are plenty of games that lend themselves to an analysis of emergent narrative. However, *Skyrim* quickly rose to the top of the list. There are a lot of reasons to like *Skyrim*. The graphics are impressive, the gameplay intuitive. I spent hours of my free time in this fictional country telling myself 'Just one more quest. Just one more dungeon.' However, ultimately, *Skyrim* represents the ideal candidate for this kind of study particularly because it opens considerable space for emergent narratives to occur. Thus, the following section will outline on what criteria *Skyrim* was selected.

1. Skyrim is a single player game.

Much of the research that has been done on player stories has been about MMO games such as *World of Warcraft* or *Second Life*. Games such as this were the primary research subjects for scholars such as Nardi and Meadows, who informed my own approach. The more practical side of this choice is that less has been said about single player games. This is not to say that the approaches used in studying MMOs do not inform my approach. The tools and techniques that are used in analyzing these virtual worlds have been quite useful in framing this inquiry. For example, Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor, in their methods handbook *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*, note that research questions into these kinds of environments ought to be guided by three principles: "emergence, relevance, and personal interest" (52). In my own case, the emergent nature of these stories is ultimately my point of entry. These narratives simply become more ephemeral without the presence of an audience. Thus, the relevance of choosing to analyze single player games lies largely in the fact that there have not

been any concrete attempts to collect and analyze emergent narratives from single-player games. It is with this framing in mind, that *Skyrim* can operate as the object of inquiry.

2. *Skyrim* presents the player with a strong imposed narrative.

The two principal imposed narratives of Skyrim are the return of the dragons and the civil war. Both have a strong presence within the game. The opening scene is actually a fusion of the two. The player-character is en route to be executed along with the rebel leadership when the dragon king Alduin attacks. Mukherjee notes the complex nature of narrative in games, saying that "to analyse the video game-story, one needs to consider both the material…and the environmental aspects" (106). Essentially, *Skyrim* is presenting the player with a heroic destiny. He or she must decide the fate of an empire, master preternatural powers that have been granted by the divine, and save the world from annihilation. This imposed narrative is one that all players have in common when playing *Skyrim*. This common ground is an important starting point for this process. Thus, the fate of the world being in the balance, compelling as it is, is only the backdrop for my investigation. I am infinitely more interested in what players are doing rather than ending the war or slaying the dragon king. Without the presence of a strong imposed narrative which guides the gameplay, it would be quite difficult for the player to either enact it or reject it.

3. *Skyrim* affords the player considerable freedom in the gameworld.

Separate from the genre of fantasy, *Skyrim* falls into a class known as "sandbox." Ocio Barriales and Lopez Brugos describe sandbox games as having cities which are "full of life" (74). The player has the ability to navigate the game world in a manner of his/her choosing. The order of game tasks, paths of exploration, meeting characters, all of these tasks are largely up to

the player's discretion. In these games, algorithms control the operations under the surface. These spaces create room for the player to explore. If the player were forced to playthrough the game in a particular order ala *Super Mario Bros*. or *Halo*, opportunities for emergent narrative to arise would be fewer and more difficult to experience. This is not to say that such occurrences cannot happen in games with rigid linear narratives. Rather, it simply feels wise to choose a game with a wealth of such opportunities. Within *Skyrim*, the imposed narrative begins with a very clear direction. The player is forced to sit on a cart while being taken to the execution. The other characters ground the player in the gameworld with stories, and the player must escape the first dragon attack. However, after the player leaves that initial location, the world is extremely open. Certainly, the position in Skyrim where the player begins has some impact on these initial quests, but this holds true only until the player reaches the first major city. After that, carriages can take the player to any other region in Skyrim, thus opening up the world in an important way. Brand and Knight note that this ability for exploration opens up possibilities for the embedded narrative which is preprogrammed but available only if one goes out and finds it (4). However, this open to exploration world does something else. By not forcing the player down a particular path, the player has considerably more freedom to try new things. In her own discussion of *Final Fantasy X 2*, Caldwell explains "I spend great lengths of time mentally in a game, either playing or not, to simply be in the world it creates" (60). This mentality underscores the way that many view games. They are worlds that can be visited by the player. As such they require our attention and, insofar as we immerse ourselves in them, present rich opportunities for reading the experience of play as just that: an experience. When players are allowed to visit these worlds and simply be, the potential for emergent narrative begins.

4. Players have shared numerous stories about their gameplay experience.

In addition to the thousands of fan fiction stories created in the setting of Skyrim, I have found numerous discussion boards with dedicated threads for players to share their stories. Appendix A contains the full list of the threads which I selected for this monograph. One of the biggest hurdles to this investigation is the ephemeral nature of the play story. By finding and analyzing numerous stories that players have already shared, the perspectives of hundreds of players are present. This is ultimately my goal. In preparing this text, I wanted to see the stories that players told to each other. Players recognize that these stories have value in and of themselves, and by analyzing these stories, I have learned what players value. Additionally, choosing a game in which players have shared numerous stories demonstrates the narrative potential of that game in a concrete way. By selecting a subject to which players readily respond and feel compelled to share their stories, I am more capable to arrive at meaningful conclusion about the attitudes and thoughts of a large subset of players. This will therefore provide a greater scope of insight for future application of the work that I am here performing.

Emergence in *Skyrim*

With a working definition of emergent narrative in place and *Skyrim* as a site of inquiry, I feel confident in getting more specific. I will here address the characteristics of emergent narrative. Over the course of this monograph, I will be showcasing emergent narratives from players, classifying them by category. However, in preparation for this project, I spent over two hundred hours in *Skyrim* playing a single character. Nardi, in her anthropological analysis of *World of Warcraft* notes that "[t]he ethnographer observes the culture in which he is situated but also participates to varying degrees" (28). In order to meaningfully speak about the stories being

told within the game, I needed to play it. As I did, I collected screenshots of moments that felt impactful. As much as possible, I attempted to take on this role as player rather than researcher, withholding qualitative analysis of my stories until after each play session. I choose this approach in order to gain distance between myself as subject and myself as researcher. By not thinking about the theory while I played, I gave myself more space to simply play the game. Nardi does note the difficulty of this approach, explaining, "ethnography moves in a 'go with the flow' pattern that attempts to follow the interesting and the unexpected as they are encountered in the field" (27). However, the knowledge that the data collection can get a little messy is noted, if impossible to account for. Pearce mirrors this sentiment in her own discussion of ethnography in digital spaces. She says that **"**an orderly sequence of data collection followed by analysis is not plausible in practice. Analysis was well under way during the data collection process, as many patterns of emergent behavior became evident almost immediately" (205). Simply put, it is difficult to not analyze the importance of events in game while they are happening. Thus, I spent a great deal of time considering these events as a storyteller rather than as a scholar.

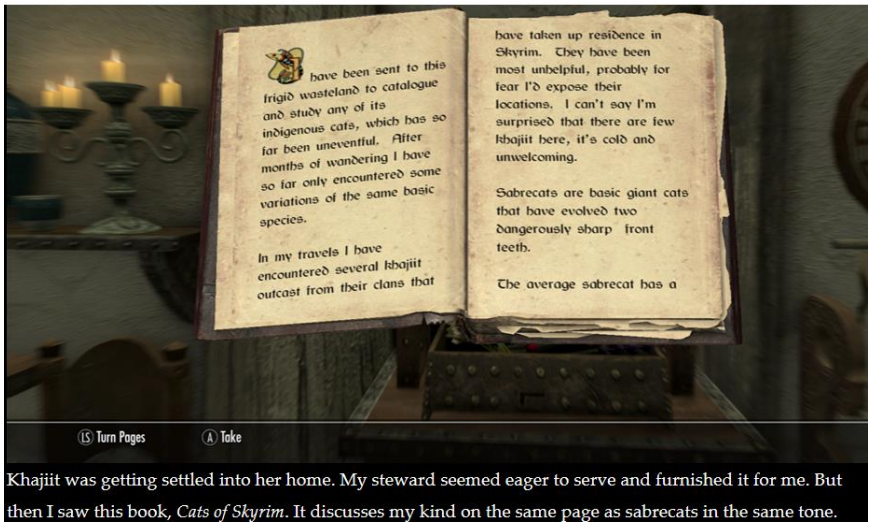
Once I felt that I reached a satisfying conclusion to the arc of my character, I created a photo journal from the perspective of my character entitled *Three Hundred Days in the North*.[1] The project was purely for storytelling purposes, so it does not contain any scholarly analysis. However, it is useful for me to here discuss it as an emergent narrative. I arranged the entries in emphatic order, grouping story elements according to their contribution to individual episodes. In order to do this, much was left out. Still, I do not think that the editorial process I used detracts from this story being emergent any more than an author skipping over the protagonist's

[1] https://tandtprojects.cah.ucf.edu/~er397450/300days.html

trip to the deli for a ham sandwich detracts from the major plot of a novel. In constructing my own emergent narrative, examining the player stories, and reflecting on the existing literature, I found the following characteristics of emergent narratives:

1. Emergent narratives are additive.

Events which occur in the gameworld are experienced by the player in chronological order. Each new one broadens the player's understanding of the gameworld as well as his/her understanding of the story that is unfolding. In discussing emergent narrative, Chauvin et al. explain that "we find uncertainty not merely in terms of challenge outcomes but also uncertainty more broadly in terms of scenarios that are hard to predict." If the player knew what to expect next, then he/she would have less call to fill in blanks in order to craft a narratively coherent world. Thus, a new detail feels like it is part of the story in which the player is already immersed. The addition of information must therefore fit in the framework that is already established. This certainly occurred in my own play experience. I played as a Khajiit, a group of cat people from a desert kingdom. I noted that guards would tell me to "sheathe those claws" and enemies would threaten to turn me into a rug. These details, by themselves, are fairly insignificant. However, Figure 1.1, taken from the episode "Arrival," only becomes significant when added to these previous events. Fox Harrell notes that the "phenomenon of stigma is actually implemented and reified in software," citing the previous Elder Scrolls game, *Oblivion*, as a prime example in which racial differences are made explicit to the act of gameplay.



Khajiit was getting settled into her home. My steward seemed eager to serve and furnished it for me. But then I saw this book, *Cats of Skyrim*. It discusses my kind on the same page as sabrecats in the same tone.

Figure 1.1: Cats of Skyrim

He notes the societal implications of such actions and that players can internalize these attitudes readily, especially if they are not fully interrogated by the player. It is with an understanding that race has an impact on the player that we realize why such experiences ultimately matter. It is in this way that an emergent narrative builds over time. The story becomes more complete as new details are being revealed to the player.

2. Emergent narratives are contextual.

Over the course of my playthrough of *Skyrim*, I spent a great deal of time ruminating on how events in the game tied together. Things which I did a long time ago which were seemingly unrelated in an instant came into clear focus. This is especially true in terms of the NPCs who have close relationships to my character. Cardoso and Carbalhais state that "the player is able to craft relationships, and to regulate the disposition of characters or actors in the game" (27). In games with any kind of affinity system (designed to track how NPCs feel about the player), the system ultimately keeps certain interactions in mind. There are certainly metrics built into the game which track this information. For example, a person is only willing to marry the main

character if said individual has done something to curry favor. However, unlike games such as *Fable*, which have complex affinity systems, *Skyrim* tracks those relationships somewhat simply. A character is always one of three things: Neutral, Friendly, or Hostile. Thus, the depth of any given relationship in the game is entirely up to the player. This is where context is supremely important.

While later chapters will discuss how context affects different kinds of context as they occurred in player stories, it is prudent to demonstrate the idea here. A major part of my character's arc was to secure a safe place for her family. In doing so, she did some pretty distasteful things. In the course of playing the game, this amounted to simple things. I wanted a powerful set of armor, so I committed a little murder to get it. However, that murder mattered because I intrinsically wanted my character to be consistent, to behave in believable ways. Thus, this first step was the beginning of a slow descent into evil. Like Faust, she justified morally problematic decisions as serving a greater good. However, as she became more powerful, the excuse became hollower until she was mocking the gods and desecrating holy sites. These events easily weaved themselves together in order to create a cohesive narrative. However, the more details that were added, the more I felt the need to contextualize them into the narrative. Figure 1.2 demonstrates the kinds of moments for which I was finding context.

Figure 1.2: Floating Child

On its own, this moment is a simple glitch. When characters sleep, sometimes the game misplaces their relative position, and they end up over the bed instead of on top of it. When this moment is viewed in line with my character's slow journey into darkness, a glitch is no longer just a glitch. Now, the child is floating off the bed because my character has offended the powers that be. This is a portent of things to come. An omen that, from a narrative standpoint, the character is sure to ignore, but the audience will immediately recognize.

3. Emergent narratives are unexpected.

Perhaps the most important part of emergent narratives is how unexpected they are. A game such as *Skyrim* is a large open world which the player is free to explore. Chauvin et al. say that "Emergent games simulate complex and persistent worlds by way of many interrelated subsystems to create large possibility spaces." Possibility spaces in emergent narratives are, at their core, opportunities in the form of algorithmic randomness. It is the combination of these

that make new and interesting narratives arise. With a large enough number of variables, the possibility space approaches infinity. This is certainly the case of a game like *Skyrim.* There are sufficient moving parts in this game that the odds of two players having the exact same play experience in game are staggeringly low.

This is not to say that superficial differences between two sessions are of importance. Somewhat rarer then this are those instances where everything lines up, and the story that the player feels compelled to tell is one that feels truly new and unique, even poignant. Robert Ray, in his description of surrealist methodology, calls for the "chance encounter" as a means to discover the spectacular out of the ordinary (43). This is ultimately the nature of the emergent narrative. There were numerous chance encounters that led to *Three Hundred Days in the North*, but the one which felt the most impactful happened at the end of the episode, "The Beast Within." Part of the fun of sandbox games such as *Skyrim* is the freedom to explore. However, after spending a hundred or so hours in a game, it can be easy to become rudderless.

This had happened to me. I had become a werewolf and gone on a murder rampage to make the wolf stronger, but it began to feel pointless. I, the player, began to despair. What was the point of all of this? Was my character doomed to become an unmerciful god among men, as so many had in the past? I wandered the countryside on my horse for hours. That is not exposition for the sake of narrative tidiness either. I literally spent hours just riding around Skyrim worried that my character had lost all purpose. Then something amazing happened. In *Skyrim,* the horses do not handle rocky terrain like regular horses, they excel on it to an almost preternatural degree. I was bouldering up the side of a mountain, honestly considering giving my character a post-modern ending on the rocks below when I saw something in the distance that made me feel emotions that the game had not elicited in quite a while, excitement and curiosity.

Figure 1.3 showcases what I saw. It was an orc encampment, something I had not yet visited. There are two important factors to note here. The first is demonstrated by the image below.

Figure 1.3: Hope in the Distance

I did not find the encampment by walking in the front door. This camp was built using a cliff face as the rear wall, and I came in through the back. I could have kept moving. Just as importantly, when I arrived at the encampment, I could have kept up what my character had been doing and simply killed everyone there. Instead, purely by chance, I had a conversation with the first Orc I met, Borgakh the Steel Heart. She was trapped in a life that she had no control over. Her father planned to marry her off to some other chieftain for political reasons. She had scarcely been out of that encampment in her entire life.

Whatever my plans were before that moment, they immediately changed. I brought Borgakh along with me to show her the world. Suddenly, my character had a new purpose. Yes, she was impossibly powerful. Yes, she had seen and done so much that the whole world had become boring to her, but through meeting this new character, I was suddenly playing the game through new eyes. This moment was splendid because of how completely unforeseen it was.

This Orc was always there, from the very beginning. Her dialog is completely static. However, for me to arrive at that camp, quite by chance, when I did, at the stage of my character's story that I did was impossible to plan. The impact of that moment was brought to the table entirely by me. When I say that emergent narratives are unexpected this is exactly what I mean. For a player to experience existential dread on behalf of a character and then meet the perfect NPC at the perfect time, this is why I am doing this research.

Analyzing Play Stories

As I mentioned earlier, this dissertation will be examining player stories that have been posted to discussion boards. All told, I selected four hundred posts for analysis, broken up into four categories: profiles, heroics, death, and glitches. Because these stories have considerable commonalities to fan fiction, I take many of my cues as a researcher from Fan Studies. Newman establishes the precedent of using fan studies as a framework for studying games (especially the practices surrounding games). He explains:

> By scrutinising the practices and activities that support and surround videogame play, we begin to glimpse the creativity that emerges from play, and the new forms of playfulness that sustain videogames and give them longevity beyond the ever-decreasing shelf-lives that characterise the contemporary industry (65).

Here, Newman discusses fan art, fan fiction, and walk throughs, but there is no mention of the type of narrative which I am describing: the ephemeral stories that are created during play, the types of narratives that are lost at the end of a play session unless the player chooses to save them in some way. There are certainly videos of players interacting with games such as "Let's Play" sessions which invite the viewer to watch while another person plays a game. There is very likely much to say about the emergent qualities in these texts, but they ultimately fall

outside of the scope of this investigation. Principally, I am interested in the ways that players contextualize their play experience and draw connections between in-game events, and the immediacy of the videos would ultimately detract from the kinds of reflective connections for which I am searching.

However, the qualities of these player stories share the aspect of existing in the margins of games with all of Newman's examples. Thus, I can use this trend of applying fan studies methods to games as a way into my own inquiry. Hellekson notes that the gift culture inherent in fannish communities generates what she calls a "meta-text" (115). In my own inquiry, I will thus analyze trends in the stories that players choose to share, paying special attention to any meta-textual qualities that arise from these stories. This is especially true when I am looking at posts on the same thread as an argument can easily be made that players read previous posts and took cues from them.

What is especially helpful in the description of fan studies methods is the manner that people situate themselves as a researcher. Evans and Stasi note that the researcher need be aware of the problematic role of the outsider who is passing judgement on a community of which he or she understands little (10). This is one of the reasons that this project relies on autoethnographic research. Kelley is explicit in describing what one needs to do in such an approach, calling for an ethic of goodwill. She notes "a truly goodwill ethical positioning requires that we abdicate the throne of expertise and open ourselves to vulnerability." Much of this arises from a trend of scholars pillaging fan sites for primary data and exporting it to their scholarship without consulting the fans or understanding the culture. I certainly aspired to do so during my own data collection process. It is difficult/impossible to completely remove oneself from the role of researcher, but ideally, the time spent playing *Skyrim,* coupled with the creation of *Three*

Hundred Days in the North can, at the very least, demonstrate commitment to research this subject without the cloud of judgement and authoritative air of the early days of fan practice research. This approach in essence fuses the approaches of fan and game studies. The game studies approach calls for an auto-ethnographic method to discuss content. The fan studies method calls for self-reflexivity as a means to contextualize data received from a fan community. There is value in both approaches and it therefore makes sense to combine them in this investigation.

Additionally, the fan culture notion of creativity must be taken into account when considering the stories selected. Pearson explores the notion of "horizontal creativity" in fan communities in which there is a push against hierarchical creativity (85). In-site peer reviewers, or Betas, in fan communities are always members of said communities. If they do poorly, they answer to their peers, and they do so as peers. However, it would be equally damaging to simply take the power dynamic structures from fan fiction and apply them unilaterally to the forums which in this investigation. This dissertation must account for differences as well. For example, in Skyrimforums.org, each post contains meta-data about the user. The reader is told how many times the player has posted as well as how many times posts by them have been liked. This is worth mentioning as it is indicative of power systems which I must account for and be aware of when I am analyzing these stories. In short, the stories do not exist in a vacuum. Therefore, accounting for the context in which these stories are being told while simultaneously analyzing them as textual units is important. Additionally, not all forums contained such metrics. This project thus discusses them where such a discussion is possible and acknowledge missing information where it does not exist. By collecting and coding the experiences of other players in conjunction with my own autoethnography, I will have a greater understanding of the kinds of

narratives which emerge from this play. This dissertation additionally outlines the enacted narrative of Skrym as a basis of comparison. This data is used to return to the scholarship of the field of game studies, using it as a lens to further evaluate the player stories. It is my hope to not only illuminate my work with the game studies theories, but to refine the techniques of game studies by replacing the hypothetical on which much of that scholarship relies with the particular of my own investigation.

In analyzing the threads from the discussion forum, care is taken to contextualize what players are saying and explore the deeper meanings which are being shared. During the data collection process, I did keep track of common themes that arose from the posts. This project discusses these themes, but they are not the primary focus. Instead, much of the work in this text will be to show what the players are saying on the forums and deeply analyze the stories that players tell. Outliers are of particular interest to me (and there are a number of them). This is because the ultimate purpose is to find ways that players have made the game their own, ways that they complicate and challenge the story of the game, choosing to tell their own stories instead.

Chapter Summaries

Broadly speaking, this project is an exploration of emergent narrative as it occurs on the forums. It is my hope that the conversation surrounding story, especially in games will be broadened by my contribution. Each chapter will focus on a different kind of story that players are telling with a focus on how we better understand emergent narrative as a whole by looking at these individual units.

Chapter two is all about the character. In order to explore this, I focus on a character profiles thread from Skyrim Forums. The thread was initially created as a setup for roleplaying, but over time, it became a repository for players to just tell each other about their characters. The details in the thread clearly shows its roots in the game, but just as importantly, players embellish details about their character in a way that shows clear emergent qualities which I will discuss.

The third chapter is a point of comparison about telling stories of heroic deeds. In addition to the posts from the forum, I will also by analyzing the twenty top rated *Skyrim* stories from Archive of Our Own, one of the largest repositories of transformative works. Because of the close relation to traditional fan studies research, I chose to do a side-by-side comparison of these in order to get to the heart of the similarities and differences of fan fiction and discussion forums as storytelling spaces. My aim here is to arrive at what exactly is heroic to players, what they value in their own experiences, and how those details come out in the telling of a story.

Chapter four represents an exploration of the grim specter of death. In the forums, this took the form of both the tragic and the comical. My principle focus here will be to examine the complicated relationship that players have with death in video games. A death in a game is very often temporary at best. Thus, I illustrate just what exactly players think about the grim reaper in *Skyrim*, showcasing the narrative roadblocks which arise in a game in which death is not the end. Just as importantly, I will examine the ways that player's cope with deaths that do a bit more damage than a bit of lost progress and a load screen, paying special attention to the loss of companions and "dead is dead" playthroughs.

The fifth chapter focuses on ways that players traverse the game's established rules. I examine stories of glitches, exploits, and mods in order to find out how the story changes when the code is not performing as expected. Many of these posts express frustration, but more interestingly, a number of them showcase the flexible narrative approach that players use to contextualize gameplay. I will pay considerable attention to how players integrate glitches into their telling of the game. To supplement this, I will analyze a number mods available for *Skyrim* in order to see how they supplement or distract from the telling of emergent narratives.

The final chapter will be the culmination of all the previous discussion. Here, I take the individual truths derived from all of this storytelling in order to showcase the larger whole of emergent narrative. This will serve as a space to present a new theory on emergent narrative which takes the best of fan studies and game studies. It is my hope that such a contribution will in some small way improve our understanding of not only the stories that we choose to share, but why we do so.

CHAPTER 2: OUR HERO ENTERS SCREEN LEFT

"How fascinating it is to watch the machinations of one's own mind play themselves out."

–Volrath

This chapter is all about the player/character relationship. In terms of interaction with the game world, Jedruszczak points out that "A player must have a point of reference from which to view a video game, and most often, the player character fills this role" (38). From a narrative perspective, characters represent a way into the story. They ground and situate the audience within the world of the story. This becomes slightly more complicated in games because the player is an active participant. In digital games, characters are not necessarily the only way into narrative, but when a game is telling a story, the character is most often the point of entry. In a Gamasutra article on the nature of character as a concept, Meretzky says that players "get into the skin" of characters. This idea permeates character centered games. When a character is the focus, the player does one of two things. Either he/she follows that character around, looking over its shoulder, or the player experiences the world through the character's eyes, taking in the world of the game exactly as the character would. The character through whom players experience events holds special significance in the game world. The symbiotic nature between the digital being and the person controlling it come together to create the player character, a term which demonstrates the union of the two concepts. Over the course of this chapter, I will be discussing the role of the player character (PC hereafter) as a storytelling device. Westcott explains that "a player character signifies a player who signifies an instrumental role in the ongoing challenge of a fictional game world" (4). The PC is a series of nestled signifiers which serve to forge a connection between the player and game. Because the PC has one foot in the digital world and one in the real world, it represents an ideal starting place for the concept of

emergent narrative. In order to properly frame this discussion, I will discuss identification (connection between player and character) and avatar (character created by the player) as ways to understand the PC relationship. With this framework, I will analyze player stories about their characters from the "Character Profiles" thread on skyrimforums.org. The purpose of this analysis is to understand how players present their characters. What is important about their characters to them? How do they translate in-game events into emergent narratives? It is through these character profiles that one can better understand the big picture emergent narratives which players create for the games that they play.

The Relationship between Player and Character

In order to fully understand the significance of emergent narratives which center on characters, it is wise to interrogate the nature of the dynamic between player and character. The following section discusses identification and avatar, two key factors in understanding how players engage with their in-game counterparts. I here argue that this relationship is a nontrivial one. Certainly, the player is in the dominant position,[2] but this is not to say that the character brings nothing to the table. Thus, when discussing identification, I establish how players come to have emotional connections within these games. When discussing avatar, I demonstrate that creation of an in-game character is neither simply creating a vessel to hold the player's real personality nor is it a meaningless transaction with no carryover between player and character. Through this investigation, I ultimately make the case that the PC is an ideal space for emergent narrative to arise.

[2] The character will very likely not move around unless the player is giving commands.

Identifying Identification

In the scholarly discussion of games, the concept of identification is somewhat contested. There is generally consensus that identification has to do with positively perceiving the PC. However, the agreement stops there. Hefner, Klimmt, and Vorderer describe identification as "'doing the character's job well' in order to maximize player enjoyment" (8). This conception makes identification a procedural matter. Perform actions that the character would like, and the game is enjoyable. Meadows examines this relationship as a form of wish fulfillment. He says, "When someone slips into an avatar, they slip into the ability to be competent, to be who they want, and to spend time with a community that they choose" (86). In this view, the PC is a way in, with the player bringing all the agency to the table. Klimmt et al. note that "[v]ideo games would, thus, appear as a self-transformation machine with which players can temporarily enter states that detach them from 'normal' self-perceptions" (335). This view of identification places the character as a vessel to be filled by the player. Shaw points to this trend in the study of games, saying that "[r]esearch on identification in digital games often assumes that because these games are interactive, players automatically take on the role of the main character/avatar" (78). This approach assumes a perfect meshing of player and character such that the player becomes the character or that the character becomes the player. This interweaving of identity for the player/character combination makes sense from a roleplaying standpoint. The player inhabits this new persona, taking on its characteristics and making choices accordingly. Lankoski explores the logic of this, considering if the character in a game can be said to have any distinct personality at all because the character's actions are always at the mercy of the player (292). However, Shaw found in her own research that "[i]nterviewees needed to see a game character as a distinct entity from themselves in order to feel as though they could identify with it" (79). This

stands in stark contrast to Lankoski's view of the hollow character. The issue at hand, then, is the exact nature of the relationship between the character and player. Shaw asserts that these digital people are "entities unto themselves" (102). I here argue that characters in games are both. They are wholly dependent on the player to take any action, but, just as importantly, they are distinct entities with their own personalities. In the case of games with character creation, this paradox is resolved by the player taking the form of author with the character becoming the subject of the tale.

Identification in games has much to do with the way that a player experiences narrative. Arjoranta distinguishes the ways that players experience these narratives in games through what she calls "teller-characters" and "reflector-characters" (9). In terms of narratives, tellers convey narrative while reflectors experience it. In games with a PC, the teller is most often the characters which the player meets within the game world. They lay out the narrative as it exists for the PC, grounding him/her within the narrative environment. One can see how this plays out in a game such as *Skyrim*. Teller characters act as signposts and narrators in the opening scene of this game. For a game with such a strong emphasis on open world exploration, the beginning of *Skyrim* is remarkably railed. The game opens with the PC bound on a cart.

Figure 2.1: Beginning

Physically, the player is severely limited in this scene. He/she cannot move anything but the camera (look around). Thus, the scene relies heavily on teller characters to set up the scene. Occupying the cart with the PC are Ulfirc (on the right), a horse thief (on the left), and Ralof (off camera). This opening scene functions more or less like a cut scene with the expecption of the player's ability to look around. It is in this scene that the player learns about *Skyrim* through the teller characters. Because of his ability to command "the voice,"[3] Ulfric has been gagged, literally silencing him in this opening encounter. The player is given much of the information through back biting between the horse thief and Ralof. It is here that the player learns that there is a civil war going on, that Ulfric murdered the high king of Skyrim, and that the Thalmor (elves who recently won a war against the human empire) are interfering in Skyrim.

[3] In the world of Skyrim, learning to shout in the dragon language allows a person to unleash powerful magic.

In this first part of the game, the PC's ability to meaningfully engage with the world is effectively nonexistent. Eladhari and Lindley describe how this can effectively establish the existing power dynamics in a game. They say:

> It is not implausible to compare RPG game world levels to real world hierarchical structures in societies, where the richest, the fittest and the ones higher up in organizational structures in general have more freedom of choice in their actions.

The message in *Skyrim* is clear. The PC begins the game with nothing. He/she enters this world with no possessions, completely at the mercy of forces that are large and dangerous. This message is intensified by limiting the player's ability to move around at first. A side benefit of this choice is that by placing the player in a passive role early on, the game is ostensibly moving the work of identification to a later period. The player is asked to learn about the world which he/she is about to inhabit. This early work serves to engender much of the freedom that the player will experience in the game. This opening scene, while limiting, serves to show the player what the narrative space is. Once the player knows how the game will operate in a vacuum, he/she is encouraged to explore it and do whatever feels appropriate. Tamborini and Skalski note that "The extent to which game players feel transported to another place, as though they are physically located inside the virtual environment, can be understood as the extent to which they experience spatial presence" (227). This concept of spatial presence is one of the ways that a game world serves to suspend a player's disbelief in game. For *Skyrim*, this work is done by showing them the world in a straightforward introduction. Certainly, this kind of work is simply exposition, but such description of the game world works to make the game feel like a real place that is populated with real people. What is interesting about this approach is that shortly after the PC is introduced to the world of the game, the player is quickly given a great

deal of agency in how he/she will interact with that world, and this begins with the creation of an avatar.

Avatar

To be clear when scholars talk about the PC, they are really describing two things. The first is designed by game studios. It comes with a prebuilt personality and is made to have a particular effect on the audience. From Mario of the titular series which began thirty-five years ago[4] to *Grand Theft Auto V's* Franklin, these characters bring something to the game which demand the attention of the player. These kinds of PCs serve to anchor the player in the game world. Lankoski notes, "When players have a positive evaluation of a PC, it means that the players are more likely to accept the goals the game proposes" (304). How we feel about PCs with respect to their personalities and life goals impacts our belief in the gamespace and, at times, may even affect the likelihood that a player will pick up a title at all. Just as importantly, how organic these characters feel to the players can cause them to take action for perceived violations of that character's personality. This occurred in 2016 with the *Overwatch* character Tracer. Players "who criticized the pose [Tracer's] as overly sexualized and unbefitting the character's personality" (McWhertor) leveraged this violation of the character's core personality into Blizzard Entertainment from removing the pose from the game entirely. The point here is that these iconic characters have a personality to which the player must respond. This first kind

[4] There were certainly characters with personalities before Mario (or even Jump Man), but he is arguably the most iconic.

of PC certainly requires careful discussion and fosters spirited debates in terms of identification, but that discussion lies outside the scope of this work. Thus, I turn my attention to the other PCs.

The second kind of PC is the avatar, player created characters which are more or less unique to the player who created them.[5] Meadows calls this "an interactive social representation of a user" (23) which certainly covers the core of it. However, the word "representation" is where the water gets a bit muddy. Are these characters our best selves? Bessière, Seay, and Kiesler found that subjects rated their virtual character as being more conscientious, extraverted, and less neurotic than they themselves were" (533). This distinction between players and characters, even when the player creates the character, clearly exists. J. Smith, accountant, very likely does not make a character in game named J. Smith who is an accountant. That isn't the point of games, unless, of course, such a game were a very particular kind of accounting simulator. Isaksson notes that we "experiment with new identities" in games as a form of self-expansion (14). Shaw takes this further, positing that characters in games are "entities unto themselves" (102). This phenomenon can be concretely seen through the Proteus affect, which tracks the ways that digital characters can impose real changes on the ways that players interact with a game (Yee et al. 776). The point of all of this research is that even when a character is made by the character, that character is a different entity from said player. We understand that characters we create have distinct identities. We recognize that these characters might handle situations in ways that we would not. Meadows encapsulates this when he says, "When someone slips into an avatar, they slip into the ability to be competent, to be who they want, and to spend time with a community that they choose" (86). Ultimately that is the point. Creating a character

[5] There is certainly a finite number of character creation permutations within a particular game.

is not about faithfully replicating the self. This would undoubtedly become incredibly boring over time. It is about exploration.

Thus, when a player is creating an avatar, he/she is imbuing a brand-new entity with consciousness. Certainly, that newborn character has traces of the author which we can study though. Meadows is ever present in his own avatar. He says:

> Because I'm a portrait artist, I made my avatar as I make the figures in my paintings: I stretched the body tall, gave him bug hands and skinny arms, and evaporated anything that wasn't necessary so that he ended up bony, pale, and graceful. I'd made a smug Davey Jones, a skeletal and snickering ghoul who'd just sauntered fresh off the smoking fields of Tartarus. (29)

This "smug Davey Jones" is clearly not Mark Stephen Meadows, but his fingerprints are all over it. His portrait style from the physical world, the slender bony frame, all of these things send a message to the viewer about the player who created character. This design process requires the player to carefully integrate characteristics into the avatar but simultaneously allows the player freedom in terms of how their new creation will represent him/her. This manner of detail can clearly be seen in a game such as *Skyrim*. Figure 2.2 demonstrates this.

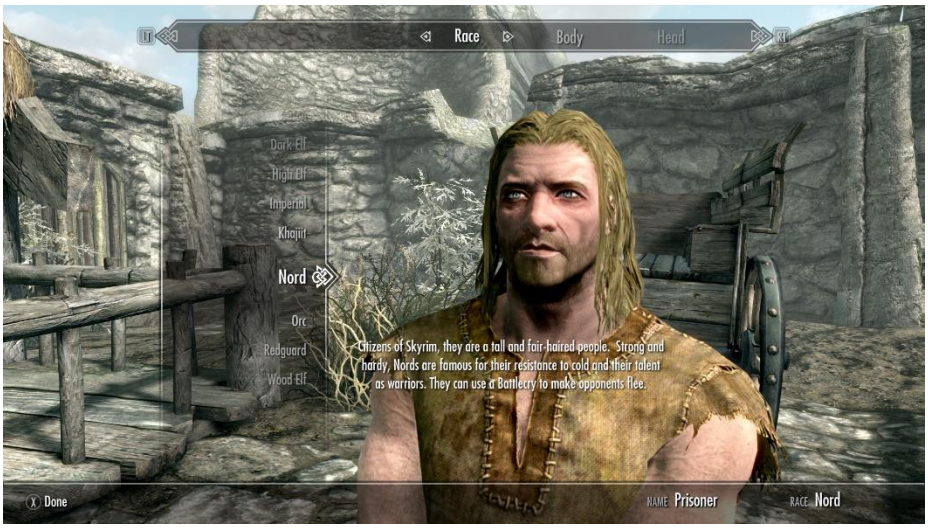


Figure 2.2: Character Creation in *Skyrim*

The player is asked to craft a character with one of ten playable races and two playable genders. While the player is somewhat limited in terms of the character's body, the sculpting of the avatar face for small features such as chin length and brow intensity gives the player thousands of possible unique faces. The emphasis of the character at this early stage represents the shift in control from the game. Up until this moment (the character creation screen), the player has been on rails. The avatar, before this scene had no identity and was simply named "Prisoner." The shift between the layered and careful control and complete freedom in this transition is ultimately the space where the player is told by the system that it is time to start creating one's own story. This begins with the authoring of the character itself in the form of an avatar. This is an important distinction for the PC relationship. The creation of an avatar symbolically tells the player something entirely conducive to the creation of emergent narrative: "You are the author; this character is for your story." Thus, it is not surprising that players feel such a strong connection to their avatars, nor is it utterly shocking that the descriptions in the following section are so narrative.

Character Profile Thread: Skyrimforums

Discussing the ideas of identification and avatar effectively set the stage for the detailed analysis of the actual player stories. If we are to learn anything from these stories, it must be done while considering that players consider their characters as distinct and that these players spent time carefully crafting both their characters and the narratives about them. It is with this in mind, that I will below discuss the character profiles which were written on skyrimforums.org. The thread was designed with roleplay in mind, but players described in detail their avatars from

the game. The posts were collected chronologically and sampled based on the single criterion that only posts in which a player adheres to the central premise of the post would be selected. Thus, posts which asked questions of the moderator or commented on another poster were disqualified. A total of one hundred posts were gathered for this cluster. As I read the posts, I transcribed them into Microsoft Word and used Excel to hand code characteristics for later analysis. All told there were over thirty thousand words, which are available in Appendix B. In addition to the hand coding and transcription, I generated a Word Cloud using wordclouds.com. In addition to the image in Figure 2.3, the site generated a list of word occurrences which I have included as Appendix C.

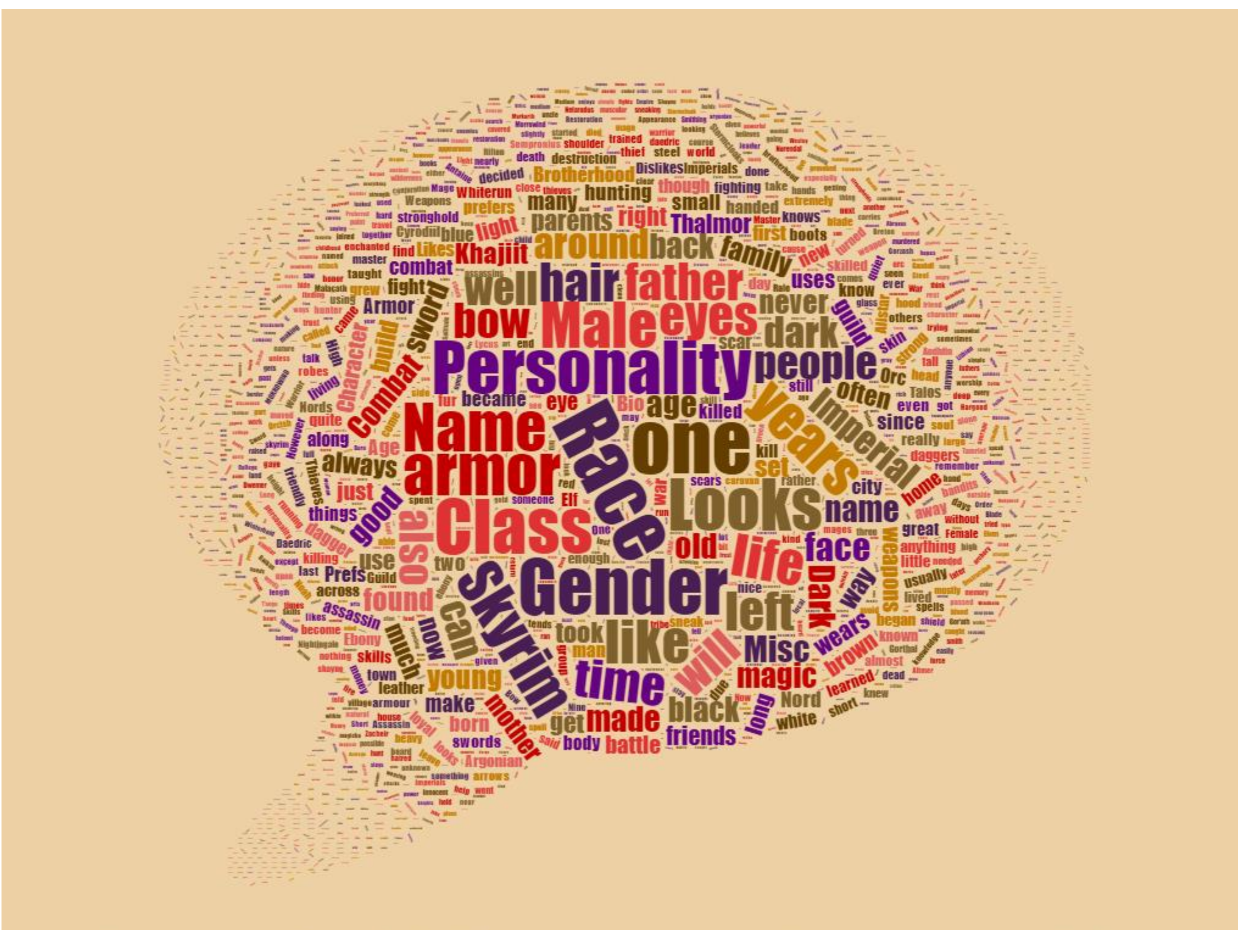


Figure 2.3: Word Cloud from Character Profiles

From this, I was able to quickly discern that “race” was included 93 times with “gender” at 82, “class” at 82 and “personality” at 80. Graphically, a number of emergent things are present within the image itself. “sword” and “weapons” on the top left and bottom right with “mother” and “family” on the bottom left and top right, each side staring across the chasm of words at each other. A snapshot of this is certainly acontextual (which is certainly the opposite of narrative), but it does provide the viewer with a reasonable idea about which players are speaking most often.

The hand coding provides a more focused look. For example, all but seven of the posts included a physical description of the character. 83 people identified their characters as male, with 15 female and 2 who did not disclose. 77 people described their weapons in some detail. Interestingly, there were no other characteristics which were shared by 50 or more of the posts. From the standpoint of emergent narrative, this is certainly promising. If it is the case that every post discussed the exact same story, then one could doubt how emergent these experiences truly were. There were a number of common narrative themes expressed by players. When recounting the history of their characters, 39 posters outlined affiliation with one or more of the factions in the game. This detail effectively demonstrates the work of framing the character within the game space. While many posts outlined the specific ways that players were connected to the world of *Skyrim*, many also identified narrative spaces before the beginning sequence of the game. For example, 38 posts explicitly identified how the character came to be in Skyrim, while 24 identified the character as orphans, and 4 explicitly noted that the character could not remember anything before the events in the cart.

The hand coding reveals trends. Just as importantly, it reveals the roots of narrative within the actual posts. However, perhaps the best way to meaningfully arrive at the heart of

these narratives is to examine them individually. These stories are profiles, often giving a history of the characters. Additionally, they are the essence of the PC relationship. The player has taken in the events of the game and chosen to tell the story of their character with a group of details that does not scratch the surface of hundreds of hours of gameplay. What is especially interesting is how these characters frame themselves in terms of the gameplay itself.

History

Anything that happened to the PC before the events of the game are necessarily emergent because there is no game logic to handle history. Thus, the PC's desire to have one is of significance. Players often handled this in one of two ways: Arrival or Missing Past. With arrival stories, players imply that characters lived an entire life before the game. For example, Abraxas "has run into a bit of trouble, after spending a number of years living extravagantly in Morrowind, his money has run dry and he's moved to Skyrim in the hopes of amassing a fortune from bounty hunting." This character lived a full life before arriving, but he lived a bit too much. The other route to establish a narratively coherent history for the character is to explicitly deny it. We learn that "Andante has no conscious memory of her parents or a family, or how she, as a Bosmer, managed to find herself in a place like Skyrim; only that it is the only home she has ever known." Thus, it is unsurprising that Andante is a bit meandering and lost. She does not know from where she came. The desire for player's to give their characters a history is not surprising. It is perfectly coherent that when they stopped the presentational play and began the representational telling that they would consider how to fill in the gaps. This is ultimately one of the purposes of the emergent narrative. It fills in the spaces that the game left open. It

makes the story make sense. In the stories below, the players are contextualizing the lives of their characters, providing details which ultimately root them in the game, but on their own terms.

Howl from the North

In terms of imposed narrative, having the player start out in the cart, unable to enter the world or take any action, makes sense. After all, this is the official introduction to the game. It allows the character to understand the central conflict, and the entire opening encounter serves as an introduction to the game in terms of mechanics. However, when telling the story of one's character, when outlining how this one character has an epic (and for that matter unique) history, telling the same story that every other player has already heard simply will not cut it. Thus, players often included histories that explained how they *really* got to Skyrim. Sometimes, the explanations are short. Rathalos "is clueless on current events(having just recently came to this land)." This is serviceable. It lets the audience know that this character does not know the social mores and is unlikely to have a strong opinion on the tense political climate. In other cases, this arrival story is somewhat more involved. The reader is told that the character Rutger ended up in Skyrim quite by accident. This individual was headed for the kingdom of Elsweyr, but ended up with some merchants and found his way to Anvil. It was through these merchants that Rutger came to Skyrim, getting into the Skooma trade. These details explain the character in ways that waking up in Skyrim simply do not. We know that this character is not above a little crime. We can infer from this story that he makes decisions on a whim. Essentially, we better understand the choices of this individual, and for that matter the motivations that led him to make the

choices he did, based on the back story that we get. These details bleed right into the act of gameplay. When we are told that Rutger found the Vigilants of Stendarr (a group who are in the game proper) distasteful, the snap decision to kill one of their members and steal their books makes sense.

These arrival stories open the door for the character to inform his/her character's motivations. For example, when telling the backstory of Sylia Ventus, the player explains that she grew up in Cyrodiil, and that her parents are former members of the Imperial Legion. This exposition tells us a lot about who this character might side with in the war, and the little detail of "Sylia has always heard of interesting tales of the Land of the Nords" gives the reader a glimpse into the manner that this character might interact with other characters. However, perhaps the most interesting detail here is a mystery. We are told, "And when her parents journeyed to Skyrim for a routine business trip, and did not return, she started to leave her old life behind, and embark on a new one, to find out the truth of her parent's plight." This character has a *raison d'être*. We understand that this character is not wandering aimlessly through the land of Skyrim. Her parents are there, somewhere, and this detail informs much of the play that happens as a result. What's more, this inclusion does not actually register in terms of the game itself. This is pure addition on the part of the player, but it works because the mystery will never actually be solved. It will simply hang over the player's head, informing every encounter but only as subtext.

These backstories allow us to understand who these characters are instead of them being the *tabula rasa* that they are when the game begins. In practice, part of the player's job is to figure out who the character is, that identity being shaped by the manner they comport themselves on various quests and encounters they encounter through play. However, because we

do eventually get a sense for who these people are, a little revisionist history goes a long way in reinforcing details which the player holds true for the character. These stories can become somewhat involved. About the character, Lights-Up-Skylines, the reader learns he "was indoctrinated into the Blackwood company after he was exiled from his clan in Black Marsh for nearly burning down the chief's house (hence the name)." There is a lot of subtext built into this moment. This character, precocious and magically inclined accidentally burned down the home of his former leader. This kind of backstory allows us to understand the inner life of this character. Certainly, we get that he is inherently skilled in magic, but that is infinitely less interesting than what must be feelings of abandonment and trust issues. The fact that this character keeps the name Lights-Up-Skylines showcases the complicated relationship that he has with his past. We learn that he became a mercenary, the kind of occupation in which one answers to no one, so long as results are delivered. Of this time in Skylines' life, the player tells us, "he revelled in the lifestyle, if only for the freedom it offered." We get quite a bit about who this character is. As with the previous example, this character comes to Skyrim on a mission. After a poisoner made an unsuccessful attempt on his life, Skylines parleyed the resources of the Blackwood Company to learn everything that he could, to prepare. Eventually setting out on his own, "he left the group, buying his way out in order to dedicate more time to finding his poisoner, and to search for answers as to who had tried to kill him and why." When we get details like this, we understand that this character is likely to be mistrustful. Having been burned by his people, he is less trusting. Having someone tried to kill him, he is likely to put faith in no one. All of this informs the actions of this character once he arrives in Skyrim.

When players craft these details about their characters, they are setting their characters apart. Certainly, this character came to Skyrim and had some adventures, but those moments are

the iceberg hovering above the surface of the water. There is so much more going on beneath the surface. By choosing to create these stories, players round out their characters in ways that the system simply does not allow. We can see this playing out in the character creation screen. By giving their character a prominent scar or a tattoo, they are not just designing a blank slate. Rather, they are planting the seeds of the characters backstory. Likely, these are details which we figure out in hindsight, but that is besides the point. We might look at the character design as the first draft, the details behind the lines on a character's face being filled in as needed.

In Search of the Unknown

If one approach to get the character to the beginning of the game is to build a history for him/her, then the other side of that coin is to deny said characters one. We can understand characters from their backstory, but to deny them one is also telling. Sometimes that blank slate is truly that. For one character, we learn, "Drokin grew up in Roricstead, trained to be a guard and transferred to Whiterun. That's all really, most of his memory has mysteriously vanished." There is nothing to be done about memories which are simply gone. This approach situates the character within the context of the game. We know nothing about the character when the game begins, and this player ws simply true to this contract. The reason is explicit, and we understand it. Variations of this theme showed up in a number of character stories shared by players. Of the character Nefaradus, we are told "His name has been lost to the scope of time." Essentially, this name is just a moniker. We do not know who this person is, and we ought not look, as it is simply gone. This is not to say that nothing exists though. The name which we do have was provided by the Daedric Prince, Molag Bal. This character, working for the prince, murdered a

group of bandits in order to receive the mace named after its creator. With these details we know quite a bit about this individual. In the scope of the game, there is a quest in which Molag Bal recruits the player as his harbinger. This explanation draws on these details. The roots are placed firmly in the gameplay, and for a character without a past, this makes perfect sense.

We can learn quite a bit about a character based on where the player starts narrating. For Largas'Gro Gorukh, we know that his earliest memory is "the gleam of moonlight off the sweaty back of a naked man wearing only tattered leggings, sprinting off into the distance under a night sky..." This adds an air of mystery to the character. He was found by an orc hunting party, who were there to combat a group of sabre cats which had taken up residence in that cave. We do not know where his parents are, but we are treated to a scene describing a young Largas leaping up and clawing the orc chieftain to ribbons as he attempts to figure out to do with the young Kajiit. Where the early details are clear and telling about the character, when expressing details about his past, we get "Apart from fragmented memories of his life in the sabercat den, Largas has persistent nightmares of what can only be his Khajiit family massacred long ago." Essentially, his life before he is discovered by the orcs is not part of the story. It provides subtext but is apart from the text itself. We can see how this expresses itself in other ways that the player describes this character. He wears orcish armor, and this makes sense because he was raised by them. There are numerous orc strongholds throughout Skyrim, so choosing details that are rooted within the space of the game tell the player that this is where the character's story really starts. The encampment forge-wife taught him to craft, and this detail is directly reflected in actions taken in game by the player.

In these stories of characters with a missing past, the work of the player is often heavily focused on rooting the character within the world of the game. With Andante, we can see strong

examples of show Skyrim was a force which firmly shaped her. We are told that "Andante has no conscious memory of her parents or a family, or how she, as a Bosmer, managed to find herself in a place like Skyrim; only that it is the only home she has ever known." Thus, the setting is assumed to be familiar. Thus, little detail is given about the town where this character grew up. We are told that she was raised in Dawnstar. The expectation is that the reader will have a familiarity with this area. We know from the game that it is in the northern part of Skyrim, that it is somewhat isolated. This relative isolation plays into the character's life. She was raised by a Nord. Even though her character is Bosmer, this detail gives her some claim to Skyrim as a homeland. The character's adoptive parent, Brynjaar, is a fiction created by the player. However, the name is telling. Old Norse, the name means armor warrior, a fitting moniker for one who would protect young Andante. The manner that this story is built serves a few functions. While rooting the character squarely in the space of the game, the choice to invent a father figure and place the two of them in a remote location serves to carve out a space within the game. The player claims this portion as territory, saying to the audience that even within the well-worn areas of the game, this little space is hers.

As with the previous section, we can see examples of how the design of the character at the creation screen shows up in the act of playing the character. The details that the reader are given about the character, Michael, are clearly linked to the design. We are told that "Michael was abandoned by his parents at birth for being born with white hair and a red left eye." He is placed in the realm of Skyrim without a heritage. Because his parents left him for dead, we get no epic lineage. Instead, "A passing Dunmer refugee picked him up and took him in as his son." Once more, the details are rooted right in the game. Over the course of Skyrim, players encounter Dunmer, people who left their homeland after the Oblivion crisis of the previous

game. They live in squalor and are treated with disdain by the native Nords. We are able to see how this character interacts with the Dunmer as the result of his upbringing, but once more, we get a glimpse at who this character is inside. The detail that Michael's father gave him a tattoo under his red eye is equally telling. In reality, the red eye and the tattoo were design choices made by the player at the character creation screen, but by contextualizing them in such a way, we understand that they inform the way the character interacts with the world. The tattoo is a symbol. It draws attention to a feature which makes him different. It draws attention to cruelty which was visited upon him as a result of his difference. That kind of detail helps us to understand how this character would interact with the world. Likely, he is compassionate when encountering difference and harsh when encountering prejudice. This act of turning design into story makes sense, as the creation screen is ultimately when the player is given the most freedom to be expressive. That we take this moment as an invitation to design not only the character's appearance but also personality makes perfect sense.

The narrative which arises when players deny their characters a past is one which is firmly rooted in the space of the game. This is not to say that nothing new is coming from this. Quite the contrary. The principle move here is to take the familiar narrative elements of the game and make them function for the player. These players are ultimately operating with material with which anyone who has played will be familiar. Because of that assumed familiarity, the player has the ability to take liberties and assume that the reader will be able to follow. The payoff is room to tell their own stories. That the player is taking familiar information and presenting it in a new way, combining details or inventing their own, showcases exactly the kinds of emergent details which inform this kind of work.

The Assassin's Knot

If the point of these profiles is to place the character within the realm of the story, then it is not surprising that many of the characters explored how they interact with various factions within the game. All told, there are the two warring factions who make up part of the major storyline, the Imperials and Stormcloaks, as well as five guild factions who the player can join. Of the guilds, the player can join each, opening up a smaller subplot which does not affect the main story of the game. The point of these subplots is to allow the player to explore different aspects of life in Skyrim. Because they do not play into either of the major story points, the player can choose to do any/all of them or ignore them completely. Each guild interacts with the world in a different way. For example, while both the Thieves Guild and the Dark Brotherhood favor stealth, the thieves avoid killing as it is bad for business whereas the Brotherhood's business is killing. Each of these factions represents a different play style on which the player can don. It is therefore not surprising that players would weave these organizations into their own stories. Sometimes, they are oppositional, informing the way that the player sees the world. Geel-Kajin was meant to join the Brotherhood as a Shadowscale (Argonian assassin). His story is marked by the rejection of that destiny. He does odd jobs, "anything to keep him unnoticed." Here, we see that instead of exploring how the character interacts with the faction, we instead get a story which dictates how he avoids them.

The Dark Brotherhood's meddling was a feature in multiple of these stories. Ma'jaa's story has similar origins, if different outcomes. Seeking to bolster their ranks, the Brotherhood murdered her mother and kidnapped her, pressganging the Khajiit into service. We learn that her upbringing was not sunshine and rainbows. "No mercy was put on her life. However, with this technique, Ma'jaa had learned to be the best, assassinate the worst, and trust no one." The order

of killers taught this character to end life and were not kind in the process. Given that the initial encounter with the brotherhood in game is to be kidnapped by them and forced to take a life, this is no surprise. By giving the reader the essence of this organization in the story, we have a strong idea going into this story what she might have dealt with. Obviously, the details are embellished. This character was an adult at the onset of the game. She never actually spent time in the Khajitt homeland of Elsweyr. In truth, she came into existence at the character creation screen. However, this backstory makes her relationship with the brotherhood more complex, and for that matter, more interesting. Pulling details form the Brotherhood storyline, we are told "The assassins, in the end, betrayed her, selling her out to the Penitus Oculatus agents" which occurs near the end of the Brotherhood storyline. While this event is pulled directly from the game, it becomes all the more prescient for a character who has a contentious and bloody relationship with the faction.

In some cases, it is the entanglement of different factions that leads to the narrative. For example, the character, Selena Vex's narrative stands in opposition to the Stormcloaks, with an assist from the Companions. We learn that she is an Imperial whose parents were killed by the Stormcloaks. She trained under Aela the Huntress, a member of the Companions, until she was ready to join the Imperial fight against the rebel Stormcloaks. The reader is told, "She hopes to follow in her parent's footsteps in the army and aims to bring down Jarl Ulfric." Here, the details of her story are deeply informed by events which occur in game. The story informs her motivation. She did not join the Imperial Legion on a whim. It was a quest to seek vengeance for the death of her loved ones. In this manner, the story that is being told is a familiar one. Plenty of players side with the Imperials in the civil war. However, the details about her family make this particular story stand out. Her quest is a personal one, and that detail informs the arc

of her character in some important ways. The significance of this kind of story should not be lost. If the importance of emergent narrative is to make personal that which is general, then telling a familiar story in a way that ties closely back to character is one way to accomplish this goal.

What stands out about these faction stories is that the player, from a narrative standpoint, does not have to do them. If the player simply avoids magic, for example, then the College of Winterhold's internal power struggles and magical anomalies may never be discovered. It stands to reason that not every character will go through each questline during their play. This is important from a narrative standpoint. Because these subplots represent narrative diversity for players, they have a stronger position to inform the stories which players tell. After all, saying that one is on a quest to slay the dragon, Alduin, does not really add much to the discussion when everyone has a claim to the same statement. Thus, players integrate these details into their own stories, justifying how they came to have a relationship with them. Additionally, there is the question of power within these groups. Invariably, the character becomes the leader of whichever faction he/she joins. This leadership passes up individuals who have dedicated years of their lives to these organizations. From a gameplay aspect, this makes sense. People want to be Luke, not Porkins. Thus, they get to be in charge instead of whomever logically would take over the mantel when leadership changes hands. However, this is narratively inconsistent. By giving their characters deeper ties to these organizations, players are resolving this inconsistency. There is a reason that they are in charge, and it took them years to get there.

Re/Presentation

When the above character profiles are taken together, it becomes clear that there is more in the telling than the game itself supplies. If, as I have argued, the relationship between player and character is symbiotic in the PC, then there is some separation once the play session has ended. In considering how narratives in games work, Dubbleman argues that there are two kinds of narratives: presentational and representational (160). A presentational narrative is told as such. The audience is in the place witnessing the events. In a representational narrative, there is implicitly a teller. These are events that happened rather than are happening. Dubbleman points out the incongruity that an audience can experience when "a narrative retrieves the there-and-then in the here-and-now, thereby suppressing (but not replacing) our direct experience of the here-and-now" (159). However, this incongruity is not felt in the playing of a game. It is directly presentational. It occurs in real time. The time it takes for a player to swing a sword or run across a city is the amount of time that it takes for the player to experience it. When considering the place of emergent narratives in terms of players telling the story of their characters, this distinction must be taken into consideration. A presentational media resists the emergent narrative. The player is asked to participate in the now, making contextual differences more difficult to analyze in the here and now.

Dubbleman goes on to say explore how the audience is involved in this entire discussion. He says, "the essential difference between representation and presentation lies in the way the audience is addressed in the performance of a story, and consequently the kind of spatio-temporal consciousness that arises from this difference" (163). Essentially, the audience recognizes the flow of time in a narrative. In the playing of a game, the immediacy demands the player to be present in the moment. Just as importantly, the player is the audience in the

presentational playing of a game.[6] However, when a player takes to the discussion board and tells these character stories, the audience shifts. Suddenly, the player becomes the narrator, sending the narrative out to another audience. This shift in focus ripples outward, dissolving the unity of the PC. Instead of a united front with complimentary goals and a singularity of will, the PC becomes the player and the character, with the player taking on the role of author and the character becoming just that, a character in a story. Not just any story either. It is one which *happened* instead of one that *is happening*. This shift makes all the difference.

Because the player is *re*-presenting events rather than being presented them, he/she has time to reflect and make connections. Based on the number of players who explicitly identified the circumstances that took them to Skyrim in the first place, it is clear that players are concerned with context. It is not enough for a character with no past to be sitting in a cart on the way to an execution. It does not make sense that a character is the guild master of multiple organizations with competing interests. Rather than balk at these narrative inconsistencies, players set to work rectifying them in their own telling. These details are telling, and thus require further evaluation below.

Conclusion

The desire to experience open world games in a personal way is not surprising. Aarseth explores this concept, saying "we [players] may eventually discover story-elements in the form of a "central quest" that one is free to pursue, but given the open landscape, one can play for a very long time doing anything one pleases" (10). This openness of gameplay is what ultimately

[6] This is not to say that there are no other audiences watching.

creates the space for emergent narrative. Players have nearly unlimited options available to them, and this (from a narrative perspective) can make a game feel as though there is no focus. This middle ground, what Brand and Knight call the "pseudonarrative" (5) is necessarily unstable. This is evidenced by the sheer number of players who take the presentational play sessions and contextualize them with additional details in the representation.

When players talk about their PCs, especially their avatars, they want these digital people to make sense. The desire life to be interwoven within the pixels. This is the space where emergent narrative enters. Players add details to the telling not because the events in game are unimportant to them. Rather, they add onto the details which happened in game because they are important. The players on this discussion forum aspire to present a narratively coherent account of their characters' lives as a way to ask others (the audience) to acknowledge the importance of their characters. We see this manifest in the rich tapestry of the histories that players shape for their characters. These details become emergent narratives precisely for this reason. Simply, the story which they are trying to tell is one that is internally consistent, and perhaps just as importantly, unique. These little details ensure that an individual PC is an individual, and ultimately, this is one of the primary purposes of player created emergence. Players tell stories about their characters the same way that any author would present any character. They are asking that we suspend our disbelief and allow these characters to impact us.

CHAPTER 3: FANNISH FEATS AND STRENGTH OF CHARACTER

"Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" –Ozymandias

Heroic, as a word, is almost universally understood to be good. Issues with this notion only arise when one takes a step back from the all too unhelpful abstraction of "good." It is easy to see the subjectivity of heroics when one imagines a "war hero" for the opposing side. This is all to say that a person's heroics are always relative and are always subject to a kind of subjective ethos which largely depends on the audience being impressed. The waters get slightly less murky when we move the discussion to the hero story. Campbell, in his discussion of the monomyth, had a fairly easy set of criteria in outlining the hero story. The central character undergoes a tripartite "departure" in which the adventure begins (41), "initiation" in which the hero undergoes a series of trials leading to some kind of boon (81), and "return" in which the hero brings the boon back to benefit the world. The universality of this kind of story showcases an innate desire in humans to relate stories of impressive feats. I am interested in the telling, how these stories are relevant to an audience. Just as importantly, how the act of telling these stories establishes ethos of some kind for the teller. In the Old English poem, when Beowulf is challenged upon first arriving at Heorot, he uses storytelling to lend credibility to his claims that he is the man to kill the monster Grendel. He says, "Well, friend Unferth, you have had your say about Breca and me. But it was mostly beer that was doing the talking. The truth is this…however it occurred, my sword killed nine sea-monsters" (37-9). In this scene, the Danes have been plagued by a monster who comes at night and leaves a wake of carnage. Beowulf is a

stranger to these people, and only his past deeds can properly convey his fitness to undertake the task.

In rhetorical terms, Beowulf is displaying his ability to handle the task of Grendel through an ethos appeal. Ethos, one's credibility or (to go back to the Ancient Greeks, good character) is an argument for why an audience ought take a speaker seriously. In his book on the union of ethos and narrative, Korthals notes that this appeal of credibility is present in "all kinds of discourses" (71). Its presence in storytelling then should come as no surprise. Korthals explains that from a rhetorical standpoint, the presence of ethos is in the style, expression, and material of narrative (53). Thus, when a hero is telling a story about past deeds, he/she is in essence recounting why we ought care. Thus, my interest in the hero story. When we tell stories such as these, we want something out of the listener. This brings me back to the player telling stories about games.

Within the context of my discussion of emergent narrative, I am interested in the stories of heroics that players share about games. When a player chooses to share a moment from the game, they do so for two reasons. First, they believe that the action is worth telling. This is an important part of my overall examination of emergence, finding out what matters to players. Second, players share these hero stories as a means of engaging with community. They believe that this moment which is important to them will also be important to others. Not all of these stories will be about slaying monsters. In fact, a large number of them are not about killing sea-snakes. Thus, when I am examining how players tell hero stories about games, one of my primary goals will be to establish what is important and why. Another goal of this chapter will be to identify the boundaries of emergent narrative. This will be done in a couple of ways. On the one hand, I will discuss ready-made narrative elements of heroics within the game *Skyrim*,

paying special attention to the "achievement" system built into the game. On the opposite hand, I will be discussing examples of fan fiction, sampled from *Archive of Our Own*. By placing emergent narrative at the center of these two phenomena, I will not only be able to more clearly articulate what emergent narrative is, but also what it is not.

What A Play Story for a Game Is/n't

One of the principle concerns of this dissertation is exactly what the position of narrative is within the video game. If one looks to Juul, he says that the two are incompatible. "You can't have narration and interactivity at the same time; there is no such thing as a continuously interactive story." There is a bit of semantics in his argument, but Juul is basically saying that the act of playing (making decisions, interacting with an environment) is incompatible with telling of a coherent narrative. Expanding on this, Juul goes on that "[o]ur retelling [of a play session] will not be a game." I am not willing to give this much ground and conclude that narrative and play are incompatible entities, but I will concede that the narrative becomes more coherent and concrete upon reflection and retelling (as discussed in Chapter 2). Approaches such as Thue et al.'s work with interactive storytelling serve to somewhat temper this discussion. They argue that "deferring decisions to run-time" serve to create a larger framework of possible narratives which a game can contain (45). When thinking about emergent narrative, this makes complete sense. If it is the case that part of what makes emergence compelling is its surprise occurrence, then such narratives are difficult to plan in advance.

Examples of this were ever present in my own research. One player tells the story of a low-level character who was accosted by thugs. A brutal struggle ensued, depleting the character's potions and hinging on a lucky break when a Wood Elf joined the fight just in the

nick of time. In the telling, the reader is given procedural details. The character was an archer, thus making multiple enemies a challenge at such a low level. However, the delight in this story lies in the surprise. These attackers were sent at the behest of Anise, a kindly old woman who, after the attack, acted as though nothing happened. From a gameplay standpoint, this makes sense. The system rules which govern Anise's responses do not interact with the ones which trigger hired thugs. When the character stole a single, inexpensive alchemy ingredient from Anise, an algorithm randomly triggered a group of thugs that would later show up and attack. However, they did not trigger a change in Anise's demeanor and dialog. Thus, at a system level, it makes perfect sense for Anise to be polite to a character upon whom she had called a hit. This is likely what Juul is talking about when he distinguishes between gameplay and stories *about* gameplay. These two events were completely separate things to the system. However, from a narrative standpoint, Anise's actions are considerably more interesting. For the player, Anise wildly overreacted, sending armed thugs to work over the character for taking an item that only costs a few gold coins. When the player returns to Anise, her polite small talk becomes a subterfuge. She knows that she made a mistake. She is secretly terrified that the player saw the note that these thugs carried. Anise tries to play the situation coolly because she hopes that the character has not put two and two together. We know that the player inferred all of this subtext into the moment because the story ends with an arrow in Anise's back.

The above story illustrates the role of player as participant and narrator in these stories of play. Of principle importance here is who is keeping track of these individual events. These emergent narratives are context driven. This means that the player is always the arbiter of what matters in these stories. If part of this project is to decode what players value, then figuring out what exactly is "heroic" is a big part of this. When I am situating these narratives below, I will

make the delineation about who is setting the terms of heroics clearer. Part of this comes from who is keeping the score. If it is the game, then something other than emergent narrative is very likely going on here. In order to parse out what is important and who is dictating the terms, the next section will further interrogate the relationship between the system and player as two parts of a narrative creation machine.

Player Engagement and Narration

When discussing stories told by players, there is an inherent bias in this phenomenon that warrants discussion. Especially mundane stories simply do not get told. This is a point that, by itself, is almost too obvious to mention. However, stay with me for a moment as there is a larger point to make here. It is a boon that players are only sharing noteworthy stories. If players shared the story of the time that they walked from Whiterun to Riften (a fair distance in Skyrim) and nothing interesting happened, then the overall pool of stories would be diluted. This bias towards the noteworthy is in a boon because this opens the door to discussion of engagement and enjoyment when decoding the notion of heroics in games. For example, Trepte and Reincecke found that "game related self-efficacy experiences seem to be a crucial variable in understanding game enjoyment" (557). In the context of this conversation that means that players feel more connected to games in which they had noteworthy experiences. Expanding on this idea, I turn to Pryzbylski, Rigby, and Ryan. In discussing self-determination theory, they note "that these motivational processes are robust predictors [of game's appeal] over and above differences in player demographics, and that they apply across game genres and content" (163). Put another way, a player's belief that they can succeed impacts how appealing he/she will find a particular

game. In both of these cases, researchers are looking into issues of engagement and enjoyment. However, at a much more basic level, they are interrogating the why of video games. Why do players pick up a controller or hunker down in front of a keyboard? When I am examining these player stories, my goals are the same. I want to explore what made these stories worth telling. I want to find out what mechanisms cause players to care enough to share their stories at all. With this in mind, I turn my attention to places where players tell stories and to system elements that record stories.

Achievements

In the current climate of AAA games, achievement systems are all but expected. Tasks within the world of a game that are noteworthy (as decided by the game's designers) will award the player with an achievement. Often, the reward is simply having a little emblem on one's game. This system of acknowledging a player's actions in one form or another has been around since gaming's infancy. In early arcade games, this was the high score. Three little letters to let everyone else know how good one is at repelling space invaders. Jakobsson explains that this sometimes took the form of physical badges, as was the case for 1982's *Chopper Command*. He says:

> [T]he manual listed challenges, for instance to score ten thousand points. If the player managed to do this, took a picture of the TV screen, and sent the photo to Activision, they would in return send a decorative patch made of fabric.

In its earliest forms, achievements served the twofold purpose of motivator and evidence. One ought continue playing a game, the logic goes, because these achievements are there. One ought

spend hours on this difficult task because it is difficult, because completing it gives the player bragging rights. These ideas directly impacted systems such as Xbox's "Gamerscore" which tracks a player's achievements across titles for both the Xbox 360 and Xbox One.

The impact of tracking multi-game achievements across a platform is worth mentioning. Jakobsson notes that at the very least "they [achievements] can also simply serve as a record of a player's history." This history is outward facing, available for other players to track. Jakobsson's word choice is telling; he calls it a history. In French, the word histoire can mean events from the past, but just as importantly, the word carries the connotative associations with story. When examining it from this angle, one's gamer profile for a given platform come together to tell that person's story. There is quite a bit that the game tracks on the player's behalf. A quick glance at my own playthrough of *Skyrim: Special Edition* for the Xbox One reveals that I have played the game for seven days, nineteen hours, and eleven minutes. In that time, I have discovered just under 300 locations, completed three-fourths of the total game and earned 56 of the game's 75 achievements. Those individual achievements serve as mile markers, showing what a character has done. Figure 3.1 illustrates this.

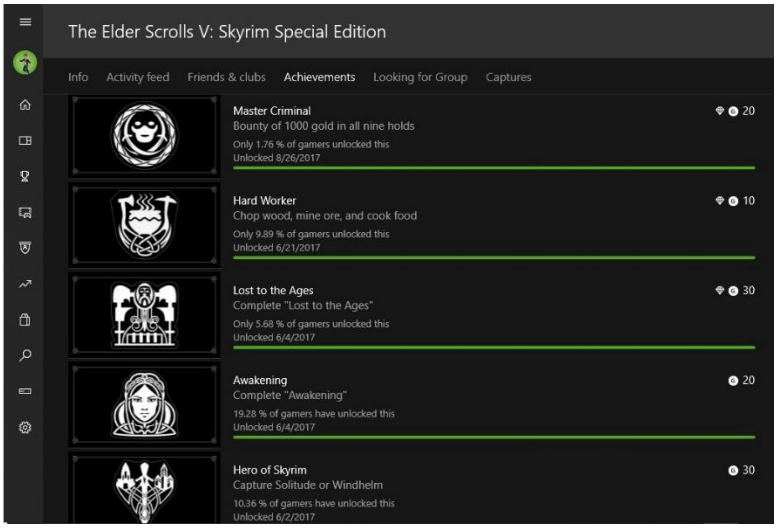


Figure 3.1: Achievement Screen *Skyrim*

This sampling of achievements showcases the completion of quests and accomplishment of other tasks. Taken as such, these achievements demonstrate big moments in the life of my character. She ended the civil war, awakened an ancient vampire, and unlocked a powerful dwarven artifact. However, the first two achievements on the list showcase something else. These are both achievements that a player would want to earn just because they are there. For the "Hard Worker" achievement, I saw that I had not finished it, and set off to complete these mundane tasks, not because I needed food, metal or timber, but because the achievement was there, because I did not have it. In consideration of getting achievements because the achievements exist, Zulkifly, Lewis, and de Salas ask "if we have become more interested in the Achievements, undermining our intrinsic interest in the games" (20). For achievements that are relatively easy to finish, this desire to tick off a box makes perfect sense. Certainly, I would not have obsessed over which of these three tasks I had not completed unless the game announced that this was a priority.

However, sheer completionism cannot be the only motivator behind acquiring these achievements. Certainly, there is a degree of brinksmanship which plays into chasing achievements. So, while it might be the case that I (and certainly other players) go after achievements because they are there, I submit that many achievements such as the one at the top of the list, "Master Criminal," are pursued by some players because they are difficult. The premise of the quest is relatively simple. Each of the nine holds (governing bodies) in Skyrim tracks criminal activity separately. The bounties one acquires for a crime such as mugging or assault are fairly small (in the neighborhood of 40 gold coins). However, murder, if witnessed, will give the player an instant bounty of one thousand gold. Thus, the path of least resistance[7]is to commit a murder in every hold. These crimes must be brazen, done in plain view, so that the guards know that the player is responsible. This is evidenced in Figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2: Mastering Crime

[7] Relatively speaking

In this image my character is just outside of the major city, battling multiple guards at the same time. On higher difficulties, the guards take a considerable amount of work to take down, and because I wanted this crime to register, I attacked the guard in plain view of about five more. At the moment captured in Figure 3.2, those guards were peppering my character with arrows as evidenced at the bottom of the image. Admittedly, even if it took a few tries in a given city, the challenge presented by nine murders in *Skyrim*, a game where players typically have kill counts in the hundreds/thousands, is fairly low. However, there are also social ramifications within the world of the game. By killing all of those guards, the player has ostensibly cut off all contact with the civilized world. With a bounty this large, guards attack the player on sight, rarely even asking for the bounty. To add onto the troubles that the player encounters, the system is keeping track of that large bounty, eventually triggering the activation of bounty hunters. Just as with the player story in which one simple theft amounted to thugs being hired to track down the player, having a large bounty in any of the holds creates the chance that a bounty hunter will show up. Thus, movement between the towns for the initial quest completion becomes difficult as having a 1,000 gold bounty in five or six holds greatly increases the chances that random mercenaries will turn up, as evidenced by Figure 3.3.

Figure 3.3: Paying One's Dues

The bounty hunter scales in level in order to be a threat to the character. The one in the above image has the Nordic armor set which, in addition to being a very effective set of armor, illustrates his alignment with the nine holds. Little details like this add up in their narrative impact. Certainly, the game presents a considerable challenge for achieving "Master Criminal," but at the end of the day, that is the point. The achievement becomes a benchmark from the game, a challenge to overcome. The badge tells others that the player accomplished this task, but perhaps more importantly, the actual performance of it felt worthwhile. It was worth discussing.

When comparing the first two achievements listed in Figure 3.1, they are superficially quite similar. Both are outside the scope of in-game quest, completely optional. Both have relatively low numbers as far as player completion is concerned. Of note here, when less than 10% of players have completed an achievement, Xbox Live adds the word "only" to the description. "Only 1.76% of players have unlocked this." The game issues a challenge to the player, saying 'This is worth doing because so few have done it.' This is certainly a way to get

extra play time out of a player. Schoenau-Fog explains that "An engaged player can have the desire to continue performing activities as long as the objective is not reached" (6). Thus, putting intricate, difficult achievements into a game spur on its longevity. However, for the truly memorable achievements, the pleasure lies in the difficulty. While there is concern about the deleterious effects of achievements on players and their motivation, the key here seems to be in using achievements as a way to draw players towards actions which are difficult because the developers are banking on players enjoying this activity. The drawback to this is that achievements limit all players based on the imagination of developers. If players focus exclusively focus on the extrinsically motivated "achievement hunting," then they are necessarily limited in their creative opportunities. With this in mind, it is useful to turn my attention to intrinsically motivating activities.

The Player, the Forum, and the Story

Earlier in this chapter, I pointed to Juul's assessment that retelling the events of the game was something else than the game. In his interpretation, Juul is ostensibly drawing out the narration/interactivity dichotomy discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. The crux of this argument (how much of the game is contained in the subjective experience of a player) hinges on a game-centered discussion of what narrative is. Juul argues that "Our retelling [of a play session] will not be a game, and in fact much of the vast journey that it takes to complete Half-life would be excruciatingly dull if retold in any detail." This is perhaps splitting hairs, but if this means that emergent narratives are semantically separate from games as objects, so be it. In either case, I am interested in the player's experience upon reflection. As will be demonstrated

in the following section, players are not straw-men. When they tell stories about play, they do not discuss the hours of milling about, not doing much because of course they wouldn't. The details which do not build the narrative are left out specifically because they do not build the narrative. Just as Beowulf does not contain passages about his trip to the outhouse, players recognize that basic story structure demands that they focus on what is interesting.

Players construct their own stories in this fashion because they are aware that there is an audience. Puente and Tosca note that "Skyrim is an individual game, but the channel through which this kind of interaction occurs (YouTube) transforms the experience of players into a collective and reticular experience" (6). These authors are talking about sharing videos, but the core experience holds for any game related narration that players share. Because these communities of players are "diffuse, blurred and dynamic" (10), players tell stories that have the possibility of mass appeal. The one hundred player stories that I have gathered for this chapter span 13 threads (see Appendix A), and in each of the threads, players are being asked to tell stories that matter to them. Many of these threads specifically call for "heroic" or "epic" moments in the game. Thus, when players are sharing these stories, they do so because they believe that what they say fits the criteria of the thread. This is observable in the traditionally heroic moments that occur within these threads. 34 of the stories have a tense moment in which an enemy attacks seemingly out of nowhere. 23 have some kind of surprise turn (always a crowd favorite). The dragon, likely the penultimate foe in *Skyrim*, appears in 35 of these posts. To be clear, these traditional hero stories are interesting all by themselves and we can learn about players by examining them.

However, to my surprise, there were outliers. There were eleven posts that engaged with romantic situations with 3 posts centered on exploration and 4 posts that I labeled during

collection as “power to the people.” When attempting to figure out what players identify as heroic, I was forced to expand what I meant by this word. The traditional, knight in armor standing on a pile of slain foes, was not enough even in a fantasy game with swords and magic. Certainly, this is still heroic, but there is more to it and I have to delve into this. Once I had allowed the definition of the hero story to expand just a little, I realized that of course this was true based on just my own play experience. When playing my own character, Mittins, I often cannot help but do non-slaying moments of heroics as evidenced by Figure 3.4

Figure 3.4: Heroic Pose

Sometimes, when traveling about with my companions, completely by chance, we end up in a pose that looks like an album cover. In that moment, we are no longer stalwart warriors headed to vanquish an ancient and terrible evil. We are a group of friends who realized that we finally have the cover art for our LP. It is a moment, one that passes quickly, but the game is all the more delightful for it having happened. Just as importantly, it is a moment that *feels* heroic. It is

with this in mind that the following sections discuss all kinds of hero stories that players have shared.

There's Too Many of Them

Because of its open world design and random appearance of enemies, all too often players find themselves in situation in which one enemy to fight turns into two. Thus, it is not surprising that a number of the stories on these forums focused on fights that got a little out of hand. gOwCod4 tells such a story about encountering an ancient dragon (not uncommon at higher levels) fighting a giant camp. However, this camp is crowded. It has five giants and four mammoths, which is exceedingly rare. Seizing the opportunity, gOwCod4 tames the dragon and says, "I take out my crossbow, and we generally have a good time in the sky attacking the giant camp." The reader is treated to a rousing tale of dragon scooping mammoth from the ground and dropping them to their death as the player rains bolts down on the giants. It is clear that the excess of this moment is key. gOwCod4 beams that "Almost as if the gods wanted to bless me with an amazing killcam, I fire my Crossbow at the Giant while the Dragon was doing a strafing run." This moment feels earned for the player. After such a decadent battle, it is necessary that it end with an exciting killcam. What stands out in this post is namely the pleasure in the moment. Certainly, the average *Skyrim* player has killed his/her fair share of giants. As an enemy, they have become somewhat iconic due to the fact that they launch players into the sky with a killing swing. Much of the catharsis of this story lies in the reversal. Finally, a player brings them into the sky for the long drop with the sudden stop.

Dragons are popular in these stories of hordes of enemies, and rightly so. Procedurally, dragons have wide ranges and therefore can engage with a player from quite a distance, making them prime candidates to enter a fight that has already started. Narratively, dragons are impressive and intimidating. They are enormous, they have a massive breath attack, and they bring their own theme music to the fight. Plus, they are dragons. Stories simply get more interesting when dragons show up. Thus, the only thing more exciting than one dragon crashing the fight is two. Donotfeedtherock surely understood this when sharing this epic tale. All told, the hero had to contend with two dragons, and then two more mid fight, "and no lie a pack of wolves, a bear, and a sabre came up" to join the fray. This is a tale of numbers, a battle royal between player, the forces of nature and a horde of flying lizards. Donotfeedtherock's tale is not without regret though as the player laments not recording the event. This is a telling detail in the hero story. When something truly amazing happens such as a swarm of enemies coming in from all directions, it is important that it happened, but it is perhaps even more important that a record exists of the event. Players are not telling these stories just to tell them. They are sharing them to be heard. Video evidence of this fight would give the player evidence for any who assumed exaggeration had to be occurring.

When players are homing in on these moments of enemies seemingly coming out of the woodwork, it has quite a bit to do with the fact that single combat in Skyrim can get a bit mundane. Due to skill specializations, players are often asked to focus on getting really proficient at one thing. This makes sense as enemy level is determined by the player's total level, meaning that those one hundred skill points in alchemy and enchanting make one's enemies stronger while not actually improving the player's ability to swing a sword. However, Onaski demonstrates the downside to such specialization, saying, "I end up knee-deep in a battle,

during the daytime on my assassin vampire who's built for bow-wielding combat....” This situation would be best described as sub-ideal. Daylight would obviously have a deleterious effect on a vampire, and bow assassins work best at a distance. Onaski describes the situation getting worse, with two ice wraiths and two shouting draugr joining the fight. From there, “wouldn't you know it? This game hates me even more.. so it THROWS A FUCKING DRAGON AT ME.” The comedy of errors escalates with a group of skeletons adding on, and then, with all of that peril, a log trap springs and kills the player. There will be a more detailed discussion of death stories in the next chapter, so for now, I will focus on what exactly is heroic about this moment. Perhaps nothing in the traditional sense. There is tense build up, the enemies coming in from all sides, the outmatched player, and then a trap which traditionally is a minor annoyance for higher level players is what does this player in. This injustice of anticlimaxis is incredible in how pedestrian it is. Surely, the player would have preferred to die at the claws of the dragon or at the very least one of the undead. Onaski ends the post with “I love this game..” The ellipsis hinting at a note of sarcasm, but at the same time, the overwrought descriptions and all caps in the post indicate that the player was amused by the absurdity of it all, and in the right moment, there is something heroic in the absurd. It reaffirms for us that anything is possible.

When examining these stories of excess, the resounding theme is the power of numbers to make something new of the familiar. It is easy to get complacent in Skyrim. One can fell a single dragon without too much trouble, and if the enemies do not feel challenging, the game can lose its luster. Chen notes this in terms of the flow experience (32). If a challenge of a game is too great, frustration ensues. If, however, the game is too easy, the player becomes bored. Players are talking about hordes of enemies rising up and surrounding them not only because

such moments are uncommon but also because these moments inform the rest of the play experience. In these times when players are taken off guard by a swarm of monsters, they are reminded that there is still cause for heroics in the north. At any moment, that sabre cat could bring six or seven friends into the fight, and then players will need to be at their best.

That's Not a Knife

Intertwined with the notion of a hero (especially in the fictional sense) is the amazing abilities or powerful artifacts. Wonder Woman has her lasso while Indiana Jones has his whip. Superman has his incredible strength while Sampson has his incredible strength. Those heroes use their tools or skills in an impressive display, knocking down pillars or forcing the truth from the villain. Storytellers recognize that these stories of impressive feats resonate with audiences, and they have done so since Gilgamesh fought the Bull of Heaven. This brings me to the posts which followed this trope. When the moment falls perfectly into place, when players sincerely wished that an audience would have been present to witness the sheer perfection of these events, they naturally take to the forums and share those stories.

Sometimes, this feeling of impressive action stems from determining the secret weakness of an enemy. When Napharen, is describing his fight with a lion, he notes that the beast always uses a power attack. The player says it "can be evaded using quick reflexes perk." This move does a couple of things simultaneously. Firstly, it informs. Napharen is telling this story, on the surface at least, to educate. However, this is simultaneously an ethos move. This person discovered this weakness and is therefore deserving of attention from the audience. Napharen is not done though. With this knowledge in hand, the player explains that "Killing a mountain lion

wearing fine clothing and a bound sword by yourself without ever getting touched is amazingly fun." Essentially, the player uses this new knowledge in order to be daring. Fighting a lion in cloth would usually be an invitation to disaster. However, in the current context, it is almost an insult to the animal. Like Odysseus convincing Polyphemus he was no man, Napharen is able to vanquish his foe with impunity. The effect of such a narrative is a combination brag, ethos, and information.

At other times, it is the specific execution which leads to the impressive display. Everything in a moment just lines out in such a way that the player simply must share this experience with the audience. This was certainly the case with Rinin_Nexus' mage. Often, when an enemy is dealt a fatal blow in Skyrim, said foe dramatically flies backward. This happened when Ronnin_Nexus killed a bandit with a lightning bolt. The player says "The bandit then proceeded to hit another bandit behind him, killing that one from the impact and sending him flying backwards. They both hit yet another bandit, killing THAT one." There is a mixed element of amazement and slapstick amusement in this story. Because the game treats each impact as a distinct event and does not account for mass when the collisions occur, there is no loss of momentum with each subsequent collision. Thus, the player has effectively (at least from a narrative standpoint) created a lightning bolt with such force that it created a shockwave in its wake, carrying the dead away dramatically. Ronnin_Nexus adds that all of this occurred with the slow-motion kill cam active, which certainly added an air of gravitas to the unfolding events.

This theme of the kill cam really making the moment is a big part of what makes these stories, as Eklundz calls it, an "Epic moment indeed." This player decapitated an orc guard as he ran in to perform a power attack. Difficulty does often appear to be a factor in the epicness of these stories, as Eklundz recounts "The perfect counter attack, a one hit kill, which is even more

rare since I play on Master." The decapitation and subsequent "chicken with its head cut off" movement of the guard who completes the motion for his power attack despite not having a head is of interest to this player. However, just as important is that it occurred in Master difficulty. Just as with the achievement discussion above, difficulty is a viable factor in this discussion. It matters that some element of the narrative is rare because it is hard to achieve.

When considering why players share stories of these singular moments of power, it should come as no surprise. They do so because they are aware of an audience. They are aware that the telling of the story must excite. The subject matter naturally lends itself to these goals, and thus, many such stories occurred in the sampling for this chapter. Players use such stories as a way to establish personal ethos within the community and ultimately to be acknowledged for the achievement. It bears noting that because these events occur infrequently and without warning, the discussion forum represents a perfect medium for sharing. Unless players had screen recording active all the time, these moments would otherwise be lost entirely as soon as the enemy fell.

The Hero Skyrim Deserves

Because of the open world nature of Skyrim, players are quite free in how they spend their time within the game world. This, of course, is one of the draws which led to my investigation of player stories in *Skyrim*. This freedom leads to experimentation among players, and in the field of heroics, it manifested a number of times in players pitching in to make Skyrim a better place. When players are telling these stories, they often explicitly identify a desire to help out the less fortunate NPCs in the game through their interventions.

This can sometimes take the form of deeply involved tasks whose only benefit is the experience of performing them. When Dragoncaster64 noted that "I felt that Whiterun needed more cabbages," such a need did not coincide with any procedure in the game's rule system. Characters in the game will never die of hunger. For the most part, they are not even programmed to express hunger at all. However, Dragoncaster64 was on a mission of goodwill. This player loaded a wagon with cabbage in the town of Riverwood (a fair but not unreasonable walk from Whiterun). The sheer act of putting items in a specific location by picking them up, carefully hovering over the container, and releasing is immensely time consuming. Couple this with the act of moving the cart which basically amounts to bumping it over and over again in the right direction, and the task is not as forgiving as it first sounds. The player explains that "It was tricky trying to get it down the hills without spilling any." Because the items are not actually recognized by the game as being one contiguous unit, cabbages would likely have spilled free at every possible moment. This is a purely storytelling moment. The player decided that there was a humanitarian crisis in need of attention and set to work, regardless of the game's indifference.

This idea of the game being somewhat indifferent to these good deeds occurs numerous times in these kinds of posts. Derock789 expresses this by throwing expensive items around Riften (one of the cities with the highest level of income disparity) and "reverse pickpocket endgame gear onto the poor people." This showcases one of the interesting aspects of the game from a storytelling standpoint. For the player, there is limitless upward mobility. He/she begins the game in rags on the way to the chopping block, and by the end, this player likely has a massive store of gold and gems, is respected in every hold, and owns property in multiple cities. For every other person in the game, their lot in life is stagnant. A beggar at the beginning of the game will be a beggar at the end. It is easy to see how players would see this difference in

his/her opportunities and those of the other characters and reject this. What is extremely interesting is how far the divide between the procedural action of the game and the player story is. A beggar NPC who has ten flawless diamonds reverse pickpocketed onto his/her person will not go and buy a house and live the high life because they are not programmed to do so. However, in the player's accounting of such a narrative, they now can.

East Bound and Down

Just as Everest represents the paramount of human exploration, players in *Skyrim* recount tales of getting to hard to reach places. Because of the game's numerous mountainous locales and quest markers telling the player the direction of the goal as the crow flies, players often lament and celebrate the difficulties they have navigating the countryside. Reaching the unreachable is a unique challenge in the game, and in this case, it is one which the designers subtly encourage. The notched pickaxe, which is at the highest point in the game, is a reference to the marked tool left at the summit of Everest by the first expedition. This more or less tells players that the spirit of exploration is alive and well in Skyrim, if only they try to find it. This theme is certainly alive and well in the player stories.

The difficulty of the terrain is certainly a common theme in these narratives. Skullrattla notes that such locales are often discovered by accident, saying "I finally got to several of these places by falling down into them from some cliff above and nearly dying." This is another example of the difficulty associated with the hero story. Only the most stalwart characters can survive many of these falls without perishing. Another recurring theme in these stories is the completionist aspect of the players. The Seanster explains that the outset of a quest to discover

the unseen locations often comes at random times. Just seeing the undiscovered icon is enough to begin the journey. This player also notes that when one gets too frustrated, he or she can just use a horse to get to those hard to reach places. Figure 3.5 Demonstrates this phenomenon.

Figure 3.5: Horsin' around with Physics

In the above image, it is clear that horses in Skyrim do not subscribe to the traditional laws of physics. Their center of gravity appears to be wherever a hoof is touching something and they can jump higher than the player, making bouldering a considerably more forgiving task.

Because horses provide such an advantage to players when exploring rocky terrain, they can often reach places that designers did not mean for the player to go. However, this is just another way for players to find exciting stories of their deeds. Flint Firestorm was just looking for a word wall, but "I go up and what do I find a dragon priest!" These are powerful enemies in game and are usually reserved as bosses at the end of dungeons. This one was no exception. It was the outdoor portion at the end of a dungeon crawl, which the player had subverted completely by exploiting the terrain. This is another example of players telling stories about

cleverly overcoming obstacles. This player did not lament missing out on the dungeon. Instead, Flint Firestorm had used clever navigation to make an end run around the challenge.

When players are telling these exploration stories, the central theme is still the act of heroism. It is overcoming an obstacle through wit or grit. Thus, they ask that the reader celebrate their accomplishments along with them. Skyrim is filled with secrets and hidden locations. For the player who manages to find them, these are opportunities to be remembered. This is ultimately at the core of the act of telling. Players did something difficult, something of note. Telling the story is a way for that glory to live on.

The Only Sane Answer to an Insane World

Some of the stories which I encountered while doing this research could best be described as anti-heroic. These players are telling stories of a mad world in which the rules do not make sense, but their deeds are legendary all the same. In a sense, we are already familiar with such characters. From Lestat to Grendel (at least in the novel *Grendel*), there is clearly a fascination with the heroic aspects of the antihero and the insanity that can come with such a tale. The following player stories engage in this trope of antiheroics in a manner that is altogether unsettling and satisfying.

One of the things that becomes apparent from these stories is how these characters conceptualize morality in nontraditional ways. For example, when Zezin96 imagines making the world a better place, this takes the form of unsolicited murder. The player encountered a traveling bard who, for a nominal fee, will play a tune. Unfortunately, the bard did not live up to expectations, performing poorly and making some problematic aesthetic choices in the rendition.

Zezin86 tells the reader, “So being the noble protector of Skyrim that I am, I cut off his head and saved the people of Tamriel from ever having to hear that wretched voice again.” This murder showcases a few things. Firstly, from a narrative perspective, the player clearly channels the voice of the character. This is an individual with a moral code that necessitates extreme reaction to stimuli. However, there is also a moral code, warped though it is, wrapped up in the telling of this story. This character seems to believe that the world is better for these actions.

There is a sense of self-awareness in the telling of these anti-heroic stories. Players almost wink at the audience with the actions that the characters take. When SoppSmith describes a caricatured hypermasculine character who is “the most testosterone based character imaginable,” it quickly becomes apparent that there is a disconnect between the teller and the told. This character shouts Lydia off a cliff because she detracted from his masculine ethos. This little detail included in the story is quite telling. It is framed in a tongue-in-cheek manner that lets the reader know that the character does not necessarily speak for the player. This character once more has a particular set of ideas and ideals that guide his actions. SoppSmith describes a particularly difficult fight with a dragon in which the character and companion Erandur are fairing poorly. However, the hypermasculine nature of the character is such that he cannot back down from an encounter. Thus, the player uses “The shout of Storms; to call upon the full force of Skyrims Sky's, and bring hell down on everything that stands in my way.” Anyone familiar with this shout would recognize that it calls down a lightning storm. The strikes hit the ground randomly, dealing significant damage to anyone who is not the player. It is also well known among players that one does not bring a companion when using this shout because they are not immune to the lightning. Unsurprisingly, Erandur dies along with the monster. Announcing the shout is very likely foreshadowing on the part of the player. Very likely, the

player used the shout in a moment of panic during this fight, and immediately knew what would happen to Erandur. However, telling this through the lens of the character allows for a rendition without this self-awareness. The player can foresee these mistakes, but the impulsive caricature in the story cannot.

In some cases, the telling is done just for the majesty of absurdity. The point of these stories ultimately comes down to doing something which completely subverts the regular operations of the game. Princepurple1 discusses building a cult leader character, a charismatic person who is surrounded by NPCs. This player explains, "Any time someone has to follow you for a quest, but doesnt replace your follower[…]Fucking steal them. Just leave the quest." This serves as explanation of strategy as well as a how-to for any player who wishes to replicate the experience. Princepurple1 then proceeds to list out the eleven NPCs who were hijacked into the caravan. This narrative is practical in its telling, with instructions for dealing with unruly characters. The player explains "I find that if you simply[…]beat the shit out of them, then calm them, then beat the shit out of them, then calm them (repeat until it works) you can glitch them into sticking with you permanently." Procedurally, this approach is causing the characters who are programmed to leave after exiting the quest area to reset each time their health is reduced. However, from a narrative standpoint, this reinforces the cult mentality. The leader winnows away their will to escape.

The detail that sticks out the most about this group of stories is the meta-awareness that players display in telling the stories. They recognize that the character is an independent entity. The player as storyteller has more information than the in-game character. Thus, as narrator, the player can be aware that the actions of the character are morally suspect even if the characters do not. This is significant in overall consideration of emergent narratives as it demonstrates that

players assume a knowledge gap between themselves and the character. Thus, details and embellishments within the game represent a true form of storytelling.

Love in the Time of Dragonborn

An argument could be made that tales of romance are not heroic. To those individuals, I say that stories of love contain tension, stakes, and dramatic resolution. Love started the Trojan War. It was the whispers of Lady Macbeth that drove the Scottish king to new heights and lows. The point is that to limit my discussion of heroics to death, carnage, and magic would be to exclude stories that ultimately matter to both the storyteller and audience in important ways. With that out of the way, I turn my attention to the last group of heroic stories from this collection. Players on the forum shared a number of stories outlining the tribulations and victories of romance in the North.

What better way to begin than with new love? DrAstorReinhard gives the reader a glimpse into love at first sight, saying "And that's when I saw him...Farkas. Maybe it was his roughness that drew me." The character is a wood elf, and so this is a tale of opposites attracting. The player recounts a desire not to be passive, instead pursuing this new possibility. DrAstorReinhard joins the companions, wanting to earn this burly man's favor. The reader is told that "as luck has it the leader sends me on a quest with Farkas...alone!" The excitement and serendipity of this moment are clear. The story is falling into place nicely as a courtship narrative which happens to mostly happen in undead filled dungeons. Farkas is revealed to be a werewolf, but the character can see his "kind soul." The story ends with DrAstorReinhard leading the Companions and marrying Farkas. This story represents an interesting

reinterpretation of what is ultimately a quest about violence. In the actual playing of the game, the quest is to retrieve an item. The player is attacked by a group of werewolf hunters, and Farkas reveals his lupine form in order to dispatch them. However, when that story is retold through the lens of a character who has a crush on Farkas, the whole tone shifts. Suddenly, there is a levity to the story. The big reveal that Farkas is a supernatural creature is less about the shock and more about how the player interprets this moment.

When considering love stories that involve more seasoned relationships, sometimes the aid of a skilled marriage counselor is required. Luckily, one of the threads surveyed for this chapter, Skyrim Marriage Counseling, is here to help. Players share their concerns about their troubled marriages on this thread. Sometimes, they are simple disagreements about parenting. For example, i K33L n0085 explains that "my wife and I are both vampires, and we adopted two human kids." The crux of the disagreement is about when to turn the children into the undead. This gives the reader a glimpse into the inner lives of these characters. Two vampires squabbling about what age to turn their children is macabre, but at the same time, it rings true. This feels like an argument that such a couple might have. The player gives the reader a window into the characters' perceptions of the world, saying "my wife thinks we should do it now, when no one can doubt their innocence." There is a great deal of subtext buried in this sentence. On one level, there is the irony. Turning the children would undoubtedly spoil their innocence. The children would have to hunt and feed on the living. However, to a stranger, they would still possess it. Beneath that is the argument about what an immortal family should look like. Clearly, the spouse wants to maintain a single family unit for eternity. The children will stay children. For the character, waiting until the children are older gives them more options. They can eventually leave the nest as adults.

While some of these issues stem from simple domestic disputes, others come from much more deep-seated issues in the marriage overall. For example, Wildroses has a problem. This player is keeping a secret from the spouse. We are told, "Basically, I fear he is figuring out I am the Listener of Dark Brotherhood." Wildroses is certain that the husband is still in love. He cooks, shares, and provides the "lover's comfort" buff. However, the player is certain that evidence is mounting. The husband asks where the player goes, and those outings always seem to coincide with high profile murders. There is all the extra gold that is coming in. As with some of the previous examples, the player is using narrative to reconcile inconsistencies in the game's story. One large issue that is often referenced in these accounts is that somehow the player can be a noble paragon in parts of the game, saving people and doing good deeds, while simultaneously being a serial killer for the Dark Brotherhood. This player's answer is that the character is leading a double life. There is the domestic side of the character, a mild-mannered adventurer with a loving spouse, and then there is the sinister underbelly behind the scenes. Through this telling, the player is imagining the possibilities of a character that has to juggle these multiple identities while still maintaining a happy home life.

Within these stories of romance, there is an air of possibility. Players immerse themselves in the game world and ask questions about the experience that the game is not. They imagine how the world would feel for the character. They paint rich tapestries for their character. And given that the character effectively has no voice in the telling of the game, these details add layers and levels to the character in a way that is altogether narrative. Another interesting aspect of these stories comes from the medium itself. When players are talking on the forums, they often use the pronoun I. In most of these posts, the gender of the character is unknown to the reader. In stories of dragon's and magic, the gender of the character is largely

irrelevant. However, in these tales of romance, the missing information creates an interesting dynamic for the reader. They now have options on the reading. They can insert their own gender, decide that it does not matter, or imagine the possibilities. This is a case in which a small detail being missing actually leads to a richer framework of possibilities.

When all of these stories are taken together, it is clear that when players imagine what is heroic, what makes a character stand out, it is quite often uniqueness. If a moment is singular because it involves hordes of enemies or a once in a lifetime kill cam, it is heroic. If the experience of climbing an unclimbable peak or passing out food to the poor makes the game feel new in impressive ways, then it is heroic. If the perception of in-game events becomes stronger because the player paints a consciousness for a cult leader or a worried spouse, then it is heroic. The through line here is that players appreciate the moments that make the game theirs and theirs alone. The stories that they tell ultimately only work because they are providing the audience with a view of the game that the game itself does not. When considering the line between the stories that an achievement section and a player story tell, surely that line is in the perceived singularity of that event.

The Blurry Line between Player Stories and Fan Fiction

When considering exactly what player stories are, it is perhaps useful to also consider what they are not. It is an easy leap to make the logical assumption that player stories are simply an instance of fan fiction. In considering what exactly fan productivity is, Lothian notes that "Fan writers, vidders, artists, and critics build their subcultural sphere by sharing and storing texts and interpretations." This seems to lean towards the notion that any community surrounding a property should be considered fan production. This definition would definitely

make player stories fan fiction. Carlson expands this even further, saying that "sometimes the only thing that a fan creatively or actively produces with or through games is enjoyable leisure time, an activity no less worthy of exploration." This definition would completely encompass player stories and even the act of playing games into the umbrella of fan studies.

However, not everyone in the conversation is convinced. Wirman firmly asserts that "All the productivity related to games is not fandom" (383). For Wirman, the line must be drawn between expressive and instrumental creativity (381). Instrumental refers to guides, technical specs, and wikis while expressive refers to more narrative endeavors. When these scholars are taken together, the consensus seems to be that player stories should be considered a kind of fan fiction. However, I am still unconvinced of how true this is. The issue that I keep getting stuck on is the autobiographical aspect of player stories. They certainly take liberties in these stories, adding flourishes and inner life to the character. However, the basis is always on the play. Additionally, Stanfill notes that the creation of fan works occurs in the context of collaboration through beta reading, feedback on in-progress work, fanon formation, and other practices." Certainly, the forums on which these stories occur are participatory and take place in a space that is dedicated to the property. However, there is not a true beta or feedback mechanism in place. The forum post is always considered a singular work. When others comment on it, they are doing so to address the message, not offer a helpful critique which will later lead to an improved draft. How the object comes into existence seems to matter when determining if something is fan fiction. Busse argues that "We thus cannot simply divorce fanfiction from its context and equate it with other forms of derivative creativity" (57). Here, the object of study should be "difference, dissemination, and reception" (57). In essence, this approach says that while we can

examine objects that are similar to fan fiction, we must do so with an acknowledgement to the differences.

This approach works well for my discussion here. If I am to demonstrate what player stories are, I must do so in the context of how they stand apart from similar entities. Thus, when I discuss the following pieces of *Skyrim* fan fiction from Archive of Our Own, my aim will be to demonstrate how thick a line can be drawn between these stories, and player stories. I sampled the twenty highest rated Skyrim stories from Archive of Our Own. I eliminated stories in which Skyrim was not the principle focus in order to ensure that my comparison would most faithfully examine the differences between the two media. In these stories, I noted some common themes. Fifteen of them contained sexual content, many of which were explicit. Cicero and and Ulfric each appeared in four of the stories.

One major theme that emerged in these stories is that authors included details which cannot occur in the game. Of the stories sampled, three contained scenes with supernatural impregnation. In the story "Breeding Knowledge," the dragonborn is captured by the daedric prince Hermaeus Mora and subjected to an eternity of nonconsensual sex. This theme also occurs in "Breeding Experiment," in which the protagonist (an original character who is not the dragonborn) is forced to become pregnant by a werewolf. Of the three stories in which pregnancy occurs, the sex is only consensual in "Demon Seed." Here, the dragonborn summons a Demora, and the two have consensual sex which leads to a child which the pair raise together. These stories demonstrate an exploration of the impossible in the game. Characters in Skyrim are always in control of their actions, while two of these stories explore loss of control. Children can only be adopted in the game, and these stories explore pregnancy. Additionally, "Demon Seed" and "Breeding Knowledge" both explore pairings that are not possible within the scope of

the game. It makes sense that these stories would narrate experiences that are impossible within the game as the medium of fiction allows for truly limitless situations whereas the game has a set and stable program. Because the game is primarily focused on adventure, the sexual nature of these as well as many of the other stories sampled is not surprising. While *Skyrim* allows marriage and winks at the player with the "Lover's Comfort" buff, there is no explicit sex in the game. Thus, authors use fan fiction as a way to tell the stories that the game does not.

Perspective is another issue which is relatively set in a game such as *Skyrim*. The player controls the avatar, and this is the primary interface with the gameworld. However, authors have no such limitations in fan fiction. They are considerably more free in how they can set up stories. For example, "Like Lightning" is told from the second person perspective while others are written from the perspective of other characters. "On Southerly Winds" is told from Cicero's first person perspective, while "The Bear and the Wolf" is third person from Ulfric. "His Brother's Keeper" alternates between the brothers Farkas and Vilkas. In each of these tellings, the author is exploring the land of Skyrim in ways that one cannot in the game. From the quasi-direct address of second person to the minds of characters who are only NPCs in game, each of these stories provides something new to the reader. "Skyrim is for Lovers" goes the *Love Actually* route, exploring a love theme through 11 short vignettes. This movement between characters over the span of a single story allows the reader to gain a broader understanding of the characters in this land than would be possible through a single set of eyes.

When considering how these fan fiction stories work out, it is clear that something is going on here that is not occurring in player stories. There are considerably fewer constraints being placed on the author by the medium. Of course, there are still similarities. A narrative is a narrative in any form. The stories have a set focus and mean to achieve something in the

audience. The subject matter surrounding the game is obviously present in both accounts. To say that fan fiction and player stories have a blurry border would be accurate, especially when one considers that player stories have considerable potential in terms of inspiring a work of fan fiction. However, the simplest line that one can draw between the two would likely be that player stories are closer to the actual act of playing the game. I am not talking about fidelity of message when I say this though. Rather, player stories have clear links to the actual act of playing and are more autobiographical whereas fan fiction has more freedom to explore possibility spaces because the author can put some distance between him/herself and the source. A commonality between the two which is important to my discussion of emergent narrative is that these stories take the narratives which arise from this space and extrapolate on the narrative which is programmed into the game. Just as with these fan fiction authors, when a player is telling a hero story, he/she is taking time to tell the story that the game did not.

Conclusion

When discussing the heroic player story, my goal was ultimately to carve out a defined space where player stories could live and decode what makes these narratives emergent. On the first count, I feel confident in saying that player stories occupy the area between achievements and fan fiction. Like achievements, they often focus on a task for either a completionist goal, or simply because they are difficult. However, like fan fiction, they stretch the boundaries of what is possible within the game, allowing players to achieve narrative goals which were not imagined by the programmers. By examining these stories, we can better understand the nature of emergence. It occurs at random intervals, often too quickly to be captured. It surprises and delights. It explains the world of the game when the programming fails to do so. It allows the author to engage with an audience in a way that both builds credibility for the author and delights

the reader. An important part of this discussion is situating player stories in order to better understand the nature of emergent narrative. These stories allow us to understand the values that underpin the players that share them, and just as importantly, they provide a venue for the player to share the special things they encounter in their travels throughout Skyrim. In turn, these details can be gleaned from the story by the reader. To put it another way, by understanding the closeness which player stories have to the act of play, we can see the origins in play. Just as importantly, we can pinpoint the moments where the player finds details which demand explanation and exploration. The payoff of that process is emergent narrative. It goes deeper than the act of play. It showcases heroics in moments which the game likely will not remember.

CHAPTER 4: DEATH AND OTHER HILARIOUS OCCURRENCES

"A live body and a dead body contain the same number of particles. Structurally, there's no discernable difference." –Jon Osterman

When my dad died in 2016, I was not stricken by what had happened so much as what would never happen again. Never again would it turn out that he was right all along, him not saying a word, just smiling, a bit smugly. Never again would I tell him all about the work that I was doing, and he will never tell me that he is proud of me again. Even as I write these words about him, I know that he will never get to read them. It occurs to me that death is not so much a thing that happens as it is a string of events that will not happen, not even one more time. This is likely the deepest cut of a death, a doorway bricked, a threshold that can only be crossed once.

This permanence, the only once of death, presents a unique challenge for digital games, or any consumable art form for that matter. Even a game that so explicitly deals with death like *That Dragon, Cancer*, with its deeply serious exploration of childhood cancer, can be replayed, even if the outcome is a foregone conclusion. This is a boon for the people who are exposed to the game. Part of the experience of a game is replay, discovering things one did not notice the first time, experiencing old moments with new eyes because the player knows where they lead. Thus, when we talk about death in games, very often we are talking about something else entirely. A simulation that gets a few things right? Perhaps. To misquote Ben Franklin, there are only two things that are certain about death. One: It will happen. Two: When it does, you will measure your life in befores and afters. With such a serious (and frankly depressing) subject matter, our stories tend to lean into the bleakness, attempt to extract meaning, or make light of

the whole thing. Part of this process seems to stem from how video games appear to engender empathy from their audience. Belman and Flanagan found that games are quite effective at engendering cognitive empathy understanding the position of another (12), and in when the situation is right, emotional empathy, relating experiences in a game to one's own life (14). However, this effect was more pronounced when induced by someone (a designer or a researcher who is specifically seeking this effect). The point then, is that we know conscious effort on one's part can create these feelings regarding death, but it takes work. For my purposes, I am interested in how players react to death when no one is prompting them.

These approaches heavily inform the narrative of death that players are sharing. I certainly found all three when I was researching this chapter. My hope for this discussion is to demonstrate the different ways that the word death is used in games, and how players shape their stories depending on which version they are using. To briefly explain, I turn to a game which expresses death in a multitude of ways. In *Halo*, a first person shooter set several hundred years in the future, the player is no stranger to death as a concept, when fighting the Covenant, or Flood, or Forerunners, the player kills thousands of them. Over the course of an online session, the player will die multiple times, resulting in a respawn. In these circumstances, death is something of an operating cost. Enemies are in the way and must be dealt with. The player will just respawn (or in the campaign trigger a loading screen). Effectively, these deaths are blips on the player's radar. However, there is a death which occurs within the series that semantically rings differently than these. In *Halo IV*, the Master Chief's constant companion, Cortana dies. Suffering from a condition called rampancy, Cortana begins this game past the safe operation time for an artificial intelligence. In the final moments of the game, Cortana breaks apart her program in order to restrain the game's main enemy and uses the last of her strength to erect a

force shield around the main character. In the resulting cinematic, a heartfelt goodbye is shared between the two before Cortana ceases to be.[8] The moment is emotional, prescient, and impactful. In a series of games which ultimately treat the subject as an afterthought, Cortana's death ultimately stands apart when compared to the thousands of deaths the player would have witnessed to reach this point. My point is that something is different here. When we talk about death in games, we are really discussing multiple things simultaneously, and part of the work in this chapter is to iron out exactly what we mean when we use this word. I do not mean for this chapter to be a compendium on death even in a subject as narrow as digital games. However, I will be drawing conclusions from the narratives that I have found. At its core, this discussion is meant to demonstrate that when we talk about death in games, we mean a lot of things, and only sometimes are we talking about a moment that leads to a never again.

Mourning and Monuments in Digital Games

I begin my discussion uncomfortably close to the real thing. The practice of constructing digital monuments to commemorate individuals has been around since the rise of the internet. In 1998, Gesser notes that these online memorials allow the bereaved to "relate to the deceased person in completely new ways and to engage in grief and bereavement behavior and emotions without any restrictions in time, space or membership in social collectivities" (12). These memorials took the form of webpages, but the practiced has evolved in the interim. Faro describes more recent location-based projects as a practice to "guard the victims from oblivion" (17). In occasions such as this, digital monuments are erected as a means to preserve the memory. We can see this clearly in The Emmett Till Memory Project, a location-based app

[8] Because good story is sometimes secondary, Cortana is brought back in the fifth installment.

which marks the site of events relevant to the brutal murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi during the 1950s. Because of the fact that Till's murderers were acquitted[9] as well as the myriad issues of racial equity which still plague the South, this monument serves an educational goal as well as a commemorative one. The site describes the goals as to "teach the user, not simply where Till was killed or his body was recovered, but how, why, and through whom we think we know the answers to these questions." This is all to say that the leverage of digital technology in order to represent and honor the dead is considerably well practiced. It only makes sense that this practice has migrated to video games in numerous ways.

There are occasions in games when either the designers or players use the space as a way to honor real people who have died. In games where this is not the primary focus, the introduction of such elements can serve to honor an individual who was important to the community. When Blizzard Entertainment employee Michel Koiter died during the development of *World of Warcraft*, his in-game avatar was immortalized in the Shrine of the Fallen Warrior (Gibbs, Mori, Arnold, and Kohn). In this instance, developers built an in-game monument to one of their own. The inclusion of such a memorial blurs the boundaries between the events of Koiter's life and the fiction of the game. His avatar is enshrined in the game, and because this monument is built directly into the design of the game, it will be there until such time that developers choose to remove it. Given that the monument has been in place for over a decade, it is unlikely that the memorial is going anywhere as long as the game's servers are online.

There are two videos on YouTube with over twenty thousand views in which players visit the shrine. In the first, a Night Elf character visits the shrine, salutes and then kneels

[9] They later admitted to doing the slaying.

(nirvanaqween). The monument itself is in the territory for the opposite faction, so this was a fairly long journey for the player. The second video features an undead character visiting the shrine and kneeling. This video features a recitation of the poem "The Shrine of the Fallen Warrior" written by René Koiter, another Blizzard developer and Michel's brother. These videos demonstrate the thin line between an element of a game and a memorial to a real person. As an in-game element, visiting the shrine becomes a kind of tourism. Simply, players visit it because it is there. However, the fact that both avatars knelt upon arriving at the shrine demonstrates an understanding on the part of players that the monument is more than a simple game element. They recognize that this memorial was put in place for a real person, and they show the appropriate level of respect.

The same level of deference often occurs when players create their own memorials for the dead. Gibbs, Carter, and Mori describe the in-game memorial constructed in *Eve Online* for a US diplomat killed in Libya named Sean Smith, or as he is known in *Eve*, Vile Rat. They describe a massive R.I.P. constructed in the game space by the community, using the public space as a platform to mourn his loss. In this instance, the monument was player constructed, taking up a large portion of one of the in-game solar systems. The key difference in this monument is its impermanence. Players used in-game items, carefully placing them side-by-side in space to construct the letters. The result is a memorial that players knew would not last. In *Eve Online*, items which are jettisoned in space eventually disappear. From a design standpoint, this makes sense. The vast empty space of *Eve* would eventually be filled with junk if items did not disappear upon server reset. However, the fact that a player created memorial is doomed to vanish does bare some startling similarities to death itself.

What both of these examples demonstrate is that by and large, players recognize that there is a difference between death and game. This distinction allows players and designers to use game spaces as a platform to explore grief. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Gibbs et al. explain:

> On March the 4th, 2006, around 5:30 p.m., members of the Horde on Illidan-US gathered together at the Frostfire Hot Springs in Winterspring at a memorial service for Fayejin, who suffered a stroke and passed away earlier in the week. As her avatar shone brightly by the shore of the lake and as mourners lined-up in an orderly queue ready to file past and pay their respects, a group of Alliance players led by members of the guilds Serenity Now and Gnomeland Security charged through the snow-clad forest, down to the shores of the small lake, and killed everybody (1).

Taking a moment to unpack these events, a real person died. Members of her *World of Warcraft* guild held an in-game memorial to honor this person. This level of attachment should not come as a surprise to anyone who has played in a guild which played endgame content. One tends to spend hours with these people night after night. The digital environment does not detract from the reality of the relationships which exist. This guild was choosing to honor a friend within the context of their relationship. There are videos of this on the internet, but I will not be citing them here as they are frankly painful to watch. Gibbs et al. note that numerous players who excuse the attack use the argument that it is "only a game" (2). This demonstrates an important distinction. Certainly, to the friends of Fayejin, this was not the case.

In cases such as this, the behavior can best be described as RIP trolling, a practice of attacking individuals online who express feelings of loss in such a space. Phillips notes that the practice stems from a perceived inauthenticity on the part of the trolls. They tend to be most harsh to individuals perceived to be expressing "grief tourism" which amounts to expressing mock sadness after an event in order to get attention. Reflecting on the mentality of trolling, Julian Dibbell, author of the 1993 piece, "A Rape in Cyberspace" notes, "they have their own weird set of ethics. They continue making life unpleasant for people." This is a telling detail regarding the justifications of trolls. The logic goes that they are just reacting to a stimulus given to them. They are just attacking people who kind of deserve it. Phillips mirrors this sentiment, positing that trolling, especially RIP trolling "is simultaneously cruel and amusing and [b]oth aggressive and playful and real and pretend and hurtful and harmless." Both Phillips and Dibbell agree that at its core, this kind of trolling has significant potential to do damage. However, they are also both quick to point out that trolling, as an act, is nuanced. This argument might hold water if not for evidence to the contrary. While treating trolls as one homogenous unit might be a bit disingenuous, it is fair to say that RIP trolling is meant to offend. In this case of Fayejin's memorial, the parties in attendance knew her within the confines of the game, had a real relationship with her. This effectively takes the wind out of the "grief tourism" argument. While not made explicit in their explanations of why they did so, Fayejin's status as a woman who plays games likely played into the event.

At best, this event demonstrates that the line between game and death is contested, and that, for some, bringing reality into a fantasy world is a slight worthy of retribution. It is certainly telling that a large group of players would choose to attack a funeral for a real person. Such an event demonstrates that we do not fully understand the implications of death in games.

Perhaps most of us can agree that the above incident falls firmly in the category of black and white, but when the deaths are fictive, when the stakes are somewhat lower, the waters become significantly murkier. Thus, I explore death below as a game mechanic, one that is not a singular event but a baked in quality of the form. It is through this discussion that I can ultimately get to death as a quality of emergent narrative.

Death as a Game Mechanic

On one level, death in games is a function of the system as normal to their operation as walking, swinging a sword, or buying an item. A player's life is a resource, precious in the sense that losing it will have negative consequences but ultimately not unlike gold coins. When discussing what death means to a player, Juul conceptualizes it in terms of failure and punishment. He says, "[b]y **failure** I mean when a player accepts a task, either communicated by the game or invented by the player, and the player does not successfully complete that task" (86). Implicitly, dying in a game is a type of failure. The player could not quite make that jump or slay that monster. The result: death. Juul explains that games often correlate these failures with some kind of punishment, "how the game responds to the player's failure" (86). These are the consequences of doing something wrong. This simple correlation explains much about death in games as a function of a system. The manner of punishment for failure is vastly different depending on the system. This is demonstrated in Figure 4.1.

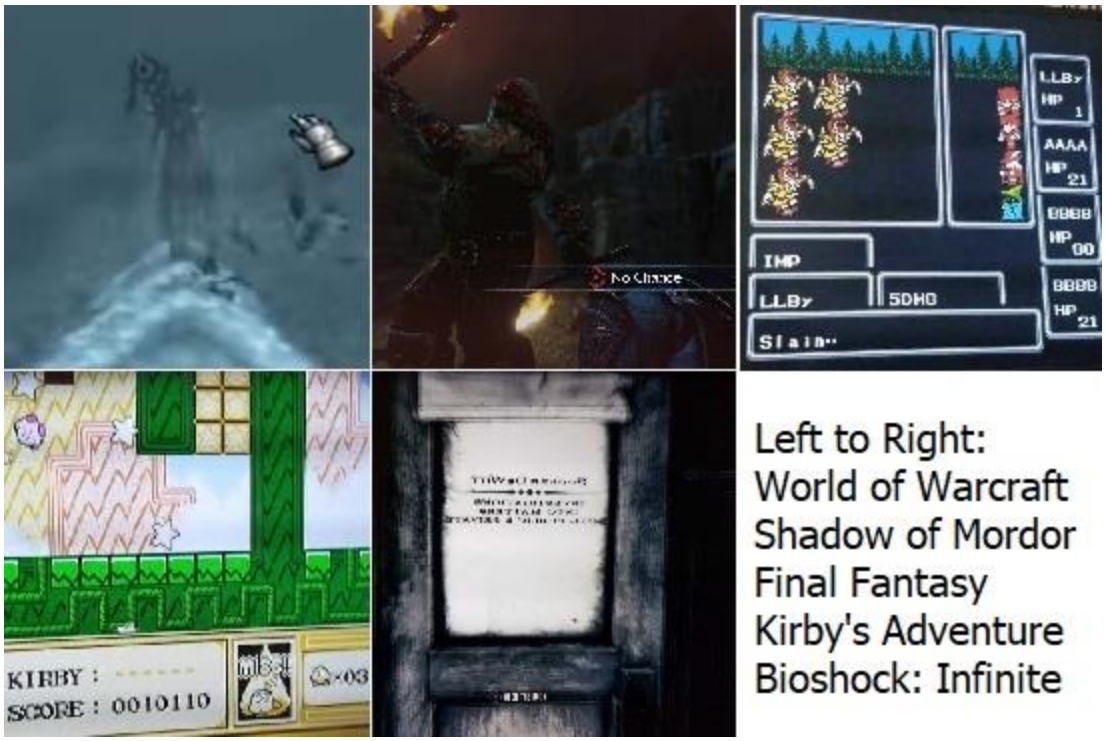


Figure 4.1: Various Deaths in Games

Each of the games in the above image demonstrates a way to handle death as a resource. In *World of Warcraft* (top-left), the player is subjected to a "corpse run" upon death. In addition to the resources lost by dying (equipment suffers damage that must be repaired), the player must walk from the nearest graveyard, as a spirit, to where he/she died. On time as a resource tied to failure, Juul explains "The question of lost time is an alternative perspective on the paradoxical fact of failure in video games" (86). In this case, the principle punishment is having to traverse the world as a ghost until the body can be reached. As there is no such thing in *World of Warcraft* as a "game over," it makes sense that players would be asked to invest time in getting back to their body. This encourages players to avoid this fate.

This approach stands in stark contrast to a model as used in *Kirby's Adventure* (bottom-left) in which death is a quantifiable resource. Players have a finite number of lives, and each

life has a set number of hits that the player can take before death. Having a finite number of lives impacts the way that a player interacts with the game, as the punishment for running out of lives is somewhat more inconvenient that simply losing one. Schott calls draws a distinction between the kinds of death that a player can experience, sorting them into what he calls screen death and narrative death. He says, "As a domestic technology, games have continued to use screen death primarily as punishment for failure, correcting misunderstanding, or functioning to condition behaviour whilst serving to frustrate and inconvenience the player" (4). In the case of *World of Warcraft* and *Kirby's Adventure*, players are experiencing a screen death. The consequence of which is lost time. The narrative, however, is left intact.

Especially in games in which one character is the central focus, screen death is all to common. However, this is not to say that there cannot be narrative elements tied directly to these events. On some occasions, the impossibility of a character dying is a narrative function. In *Middle Earth: Shadow of Mordor* (top-center), for example, when a player is defeated in battle, he/she is "denied death." As a part of the story, a spirit inhabiting the main character prevents the character from passing to the next life. Thus, the screen death is quite real. The enemy becomes stronger, punishing the character for failure, and the player loses time by being moved to a tower for resurrection. However, from a narrative standpoint, the character has not died at all. The result is that the player can experience the punishment for failure in a way that plays into the narrative.

On the other hand, a game such as *Bioshock Infinite* (bottom-center), uses screen death to impose a narrative death of sorts upon the player. Because the game functions on the principles of an infinite multiverse with an infinite number of main characters, when the player dies on screen, they are either resuscitated on the battlefield, or sent back to the door featured in Figure

4.1. If they are sent to that door, the previous iteration of the character, Booker Dewitt, is actually dead. This is in opposition to conventional wisdom about the player character. Amara, McKenzie, and Hobbs explain that "[i]n most cases of PC (playable character) death the respawned character is not changed, visibly or otherwise, by the death experience; there is nothing to suggest we are playing a different character. Playable characters are therefore, by default, immortal." This paradigm of immortality is implicitly supported by the character that appears being the same person. However, *Bioshock Infinite* challenges this assertion through the use narrative use of the Many Worlds Theory. The player becomes a different iteration of Dewitt who did things slightly differently in a different reality. Schott points out that the game "requiring a player to switch virtual bodies when their player-character experiences narrative death" (5) is a mechanism which allows the player to continue playing even if the character is dead. In this case, the screen death always results in a narrative death, but it does so in a way that allows the player to carry on.

In games which feature multiple characters that the player controls to one degree or another, narrative death does not necessarily result in screen death. In *Final Fantasy* (top right) for example, one character dying is not necessarily the end. Players can carry on with the fight, looking for a phoenix down to bring back the lost character. Compare this with the loss of Aeris in *Final Fantasy VII,* a narrative death which is irreversible, and the distinction is clear. Harrer notes, "For players who identify with Cloud Strife, the questions and concerns he raises in the light of Aeris's death address themselves in a way that can be deeply engaging" (613). Because the player spent the better part of this game getting to know the character Aeris, because her death is a surprise, because the scene itself plays out agonizingly slowly, it has impact on the player. Perhaps most importantly, this death matters in ways that the screen death discussed

above cannot because it is irreversible. One cannot jump to a previous save in order to spare Aeris from Sephiroth's blade. It is this distinction that ultimately separates the mechanical aspect of death as a game mechanic form the outcome as a narrative element. To be clear, this cross-section of ways that a player might encounter death in games is by no means a complete list, but it does demonstrate the variety of ways that players encounter the phenomenon as a mechanic in games. Just as importantly, these games showcase the differences between screen and narrative death, which ultimately informs my overall discussion of players incorporating death as a function of the stories that they tell about play. It is therefore useful to turn my attention to the ways that players deal with these deaths when they encounter them in games.

Effects of Death on Players

When encountering death as a function of a system, players tend to recognize it as just that, a procedure that is inherent to the game. Van Den Hoogen, Poels, Ijsselsteijn, and de Kort note that the "player is outwitted by the game's engine or competitor and loses the battle, at least temporarily" (445). In one sense, the threat of defeat is part of the reason that players enjoy the games in the first place. If there is no challenge, then nothing is gained by overcoming. However, they go on to posit that the moment of screen death serves another function. It serves as a "temporary reduction of tension." (445). Unless the player makes some kind of mistake, such as taking a leap that he/she cannot survive, the death often occurs during a moment of play with heightened anxiety. Thus, the death itself is a moments reprieve from the tense battle. These authors argue that such moments give the player the opportunity to reflect on the battle,

and ultimately improve, provided that the player perceives the challenge as surmountable. If the player believes that the encounter is too difficult, frustration ensues instead.

This frustration has everything to do with how in control the player feels at the moment a death in game occurs. Evgeniya, reflecting on participant observation, describes just this, saying, "I noticed in the ways they evoked the feelings of powerlessness and lack of control, or forced me to question my actions and my involvement in the systems of violence underlying their design" (3). Essentially, when players feel as though they have sway over the actions in a game, they can use death as a feedback mechanism. When they do not, this becomes much more difficult. Mukherjee and Pitchford note how these issues can manifest in real ways for players. The player can feel empathy for the character, experiencing disorientation and tension (48). All of this comes together to the central part of our understanding of death in games. When they are built into the system as a feedback mechanism which causes the player to improve, we hardly notice the death itself after the respawn. However, when the death event causes the player to feel out of control, the player responds by feeling out of control. This empathic reaction only increases when story is present. Schnieder, Lang, Shin, and Bradley explain that "Identification was significantly greater when a story-based game than when playing a nonstory-based game" (369-70). In essence, the more real the player feels the moment is, the deeper the emotional reactions that players have as a result of the event. It is with this in mind that I turn to the player stories from the forums. Players chose these moments to share because the moments came as a surprise. In one way, telling these stories is a move in asking for empathy from fellow players. By exploring the death stories that players have posted to the forums, their conception of death as a concept in games becomes infinitely clearer.

Playing Dead: Narrative Expressions of Death

In searching for player stories on the forums, my focus has always been finding narratives which subvert expectations in some way. If these player stories are truly emergent, then they must present something to the reader that is more than just the story being told by the system. Stories of death present a unique challenge in this respect. When players talk about killing, this is typically the game operating as expected. When a player dies, however, we can infer that something has gone wrong. The story that the system is trying to tell has been interrupted in some way, and one way or another, the player is to blame. However, this is not to say that the system does not expect this. After all, the designers took the time to create 'kill cams' for multiple weapons, moments in which the game camera zooms out to show a kind of glamor shot of the kill, as seen in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2: A Death before Dying

In order to get to the heart of what is narratively going on here, I look at death in *Skyrim* as a variable which the system executes. From a narrative standpoint, the system does not really care if the player dies. As soon as it happens, the player is whisked back to the previous savepoint. For all intents and purposes, the death never happened. Thus, from a story standpoint, the player is in a superposition upon death. The game's story carries on as though nothing happened, while the player is keenly aware of the occurrence. It is here that I draw a distinction, here that I stake my claim that the game's story does not account for the player death, thus creating room for emergent narrative. I therefore explore these death stories from the forums. Only 55 of the player stories sampled were about the death of the player. Thus, the following sections will explore stories of player death, but they will also showcase deaths in game that players thought were worth sharing.

"A dying man can do nothing easy." Ben Franklyn

When I began this inquiry, I believed that many of the stories players would share would be epic recountings of monsters pouring out of the woodwork, the player finally succumbing to his/her wounds. I was surprised that of the hundred I sampled, only a few fit the criteria. However, when they did occur, the players made it clear that they would not be brought down easily.

Bakeddirty describes the game story unfolding in an unsatisfactory fashion. The civil war quests often involve unseating regional leaders as part of the war effort, and since this player sided with the rebel Stormcloaks, this meant that the city of Whiterun was in line for a change of leadership. Bakeddirty explains that "to attack it and kill the jarl

didn't sit well with me, I even tried to stop the battle." It is worth noting that once the war is underway, its effects can be delayed, but never averted. Once the player begins this quest, it only ends when Whiterun has changed hands. However, the player would not be deterred, describing a scene of attacking the rebel leader, Ulfric Stormcloak. The impossibility of such a task is apparent, as Ulfric is ruled essential by the game, making him impossible to kill. Thus, the player attacking him, was a fruitless endeavor that could only end with the player fleeing or being killed. However, for Bakeddirty, the task was worthy, even if the outcome was already decided. The reader is told, "For fifteen + minutes I was a whirlwind of death and destruction that couldn't be stopped. With my last sliver of health, as I saw ulfric rising once more, I whirlwind sprinted at him, smashed him in the face." To describe this on a system level, the player was trying something that is impossible. Unless the player is on a particular quest, Ulfric cannot be killed. However, the player prioritizes a personal quest over mere logic. In this fashion, the player is rewriting a bad idea as a martyr narrative. The disconnect between the player story and system story is apparent. The only thing the system would register is that a crime has been committed, giving the player a bounty and alerting the local guards to intervene.

When players put themselves in such impossible situations, there does seem to be a theme of attempting to right a wrong that is built into the system. Harr13on tells a similar tale of intervening in an impossible situation. First, some context. The first time a player visits Solitude, an execution is being held. A man named Roggvir is being executed for dereliction of duty. Within the confines of the game's story, this execution makes sense. Roggvir allowed Ulfric to escape after killing the high king of Skyrim (the inciting incident for the war). Within the game's story, the Imperial army is in control of Solitude, and Roggvir is guilty of treason. There are enough guards on site that Roggvir's fate is all but sealed. Enter Harr13on. This

player saw the execution which was being carried out and opted to intervene. The reader is given a character-driven motivation for the intervention. "I was a Paladin, a man to look up to." Despite the system deciding that this event would occur, the player makes the decision to intervene on moral grounds. Trying to avoid additional bloodshed, Harr13on enters the city alone, leaving the follower Aela at the gate. This demonstrates a system-level understanding of the player. When a follower witnesses a player engage in combat, said follower becomes hostile against any person, beast, or monster that is currently hostile to the player. When a player attacks a guard (of which the executioner was), every person in town who saw this becomes hostile to the player. Thus, if the player had attacked a guard in Aela's presence, she would have slaughtered every defenseless townsperson who was in the vicinity. A player, by him/herself can perform a kill, then run away until things have cooled down.

Thus, Harr13on attacks the guard, Roggvir runs, and "Chaos emerged and I tried to get out of there." The player summons a fire spirit to distract the crowd for retreat, and it starts murdering everyone. Then, Aela zones into the town and does the same. During the massacre, Roggvir is killed, rendering the entire exercise pointless. The reader is told, "I, in a fit of anger and sadness kill every last guard and run, and when I stopped I was no more…" The player's story is one of frustration, simply trying to do some good, and it ending in pointless suffering. The player is only left with anger, fighting until meeting an end.

In both of these stories, the player signals out the death because it meant something. In each case, the story of the death matters precisely because the player attempted to right some kind of injustice within the system. What is especially interesting is the ephemeral nature of death in a game like *Skyrim*. As soon as the player perishes, the event basically did not happen

as far as the system concerned. Thus, the player must tell the story, must make it as epic as possible. In the telling, the player is ultimately preserving the injustice.

"This dying is boring." Richard Feynman

If only a few players told stories of triumphantly rising up against a system where a death means nothing, quite a few more shared stories of deaths that were pointless, silly, and humorous. Accidents are commonplace in these stories. A total of seven players described falling off a cliff due to shouting. Essentially, the player believed a shout like Unrelenting Force (which pushes enemies backwards) to be equipped, when invariably, they actually had Whirlwind Sprint (which moves the player forward) in their shout button. 6string4life notes, "I think this is the most common death in TES skyrim." I've certainly done it. Deaths like this are short, coming out of nowhere, and punctuated by a loading screen.

Still, players chose to share quite a few of them. Answering ways that the player has died, Dougymc says, "I jumped into the cart outside Alvor's house." The post is short, many like this are. Still, the player is demonstrating a shared knowledge within the framework of the game. The comment is made like an afterthought, and this makes sense. It is quite likely that a player who has spent enough time in Skyrim has encountered the dangers of carts. The do not apply physics properly and can absolutely kill the player. Being killed by in-game objects becomes a punchline to a joke. Tacosarefriends explains that a pile of clutter took dealt a killing blow, saying "it all started vibrating quickly and I started getting hurt, and then I got stuck." The anticlimactic

nature of these deaths ultimately contributes to the narrative. These little moments, lurking in the periphery, just waiting for the player to make a mistake. Maximum326 points to an incident, fleeing from a dragon with low health. Being killed by a dragon is one thing. This is a death worthy of song. However, "a mudcrab comes out of the ground hits me once and I die" is a somewhat different story.

In moments such as these, the only thing the player can do is laugh. After all, the game forgets, there is no real story here, so making light of the situation is the only real option. Grönroos explains how players can internalize this humor while playing, namely through what she calls relief humor and incongruity humor. In a game such as *Skyrim*, the difficulty setting is a tremendous predictor of the number of times that a player will die. Setting the game to Legendary (as will become apparent when I discuss 'dead is dead' play) means that the player will die often. Keeping a light mood is the only real way to deal with this frustration. Grönroos posits that "[r]elief humour could partially explain the allure of extremely hard, unforgiving games where the player dies frequently and in many different ways" (22). In essence, the tense, adrenaline fueled play sessions lead to players making light of their deaths once the pressure is off. This is absolutely in line with Van Der Hoogen, Poels, Ijsselsteijnm and de Kort's observation that player's tend to smile when they die in a game (up to a point) (445). Another possible reason that players tend to make light of these deaths is the concept of incongruity humor. The situations, in and of themselves are ridiculous, a legendary dragon slayer being killed by buckets.

This was certainly the case for Shniggles who describes an Argonian character who somehow did not gain the Water Breathing trait. This would certainly come as a surprise, since all Argonians can breathe underwater. Still, the player says that "I drowned while catching

salmon in Riverwood." The potential for glitches in the system to create emergent moments will be explored in the next chapter, but what is important here is that the reader can imagine this pedestrian death and how it must have been both frustrating and downright silly. Part of the reason that players share these stories as humor rather than complaints can likely be a move for empathy. It is difficult to empathize with someone complaining about a minor setback such as this, but to laugh along with them, that is easy.

"Such secrets have been revealed to me that all I have written now appears as so much straw."
Thomas Aquinas

As a game mechanic, death serves a purpose. Certainly, from the perspective of Juul, it is to punish the player for failure, but that is the procedure of death, not the reason. The reason is to teach the player something. When we die in a game, we try to avoid the circumstances that led to the death. We try to get better. When a boss fight goes poorly, or the player heads into the world without a full complement of potions, death instructs us to be more careful, to not stand on glowing runes. The first time I encountered a giant in Skyrim, I charged in headlong, and was promptly punted into the stratosphere. The fact that nine of the stories sampled describe being killed by a giant, and seven of those include their own story of being similarly launched demonstrates that players tend to learn by dying in games. I certainly was more cautious around giants after this. Thus, it is not surprising that some player stories focus on the ways that they learned from their death.

Players explicitly describe how the story contains a lesson in these stories. Villemann explains riding a horse along a cliff to take in the sights. As described in the

third chapter, horses are exceptional at getting the player to those hard to reach places. However, this approach is not without its perils. The player tells us, "Tried to turn around, fell of the cliff, killed horse." This is an all too familiar refrain, losing one's poor horse to fall damage. Most horses in the game cannot survive a decent fall (Shadowmere excluded). However, sometimes the lesson is truly driven home. Villemann goes on to explain "fell even further, died." This one-two drop makes the message to take care around cliffs is enough to get any player to pay better attention. The player notes that saving is now a priority around such places.

Admittedly, the games often build instructions into the interface. For example, when crouching, the game informs the player if he/she is successfully hidden from view. At the interface level, this is demonstrated to the player via an onscreen "eye" which indicates the status. If the eye is all the way open, the player has been seen. If it is all the way closed, the player has not been noticed. Anywhere in-between these, and there is an enemy actively searching for the player, but they have been unsuccessful at finding him/her. The system is fairly intuitive and easy to pick up, as demonstrated by Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3: Away from Prying Eyes

However, intuitive is not the same as explicit. Vondahl learns this when attempting to steal potions from the Riverwood Trader. The player explains that "I didn't understand that you weren't sneaking/hidden unless the eye is closed, so I was crouching in plain site." At the level of narrative, the scene must have been interesting. The shopkeeper and his sister having a conversation while a stranger kneels and begins creeping through the store in view of both of them, stealing their inventory. The reader is told, "Camilla started an angry mob and they killed me as soon as I opened the door." In this case, the player was still experimenting with the game, testing out what could and could not be done. Riverwood is the first town the player visits, and Vondahl indicated this being the first playthrough. However, such a harsh lesson surely got this player to thoroughly learn the stealth mechanics in the game.

Sometimes, the lesson is as simple as listen and rigorously apply common sense. When CoffeeBox is describing a Dark Brotherhood quest to assassinate the emperor, the player notes

that the faction's leader gives the player a jarrin root. Astrid makes a point of informing the player that the root is highly toxic. A common practice in *Skyrim* is to eat at least one of a new alchemical ingredient as it allows the player to learn the first of four types of potion that the ingredient makes. Thus, CoffeeBox "immediately pop it into my mouth to discover it's alchemical properties." Astrid was not kidding. Unless the player is extremely high level and willing to burn through a lot of potions, consuming a jarrin root will kill the player nearly instantaneously. Still, the moment does serve as a learning opportunity. The payer dies quickly, and it is quite likely that CoffeeBox was more careful around poisons after the reload.

It is easy to look at some of these deaths and write them off as rookie mistakes. However, doing so not only discounts the importance of these player stories, it pretends that there was not a point at which we as players had much to learn about games. The learning from death moments are there as a mechanism for players to improve. James Paul Gee's sixth principle of learning in games applies here. He says that games have "psychosocial moratorium—that is, a learning space in which the learner can take risks where real-world consequences are lowered" (61). A player dying in a game should not be the end of the world because it would make players extremely risk averse. By simply giving players a load screen upon death, *Skyrim* affords players space to make mistakes, and these stories serve as a testament to that.

"Damn it, how will I ever get out of this labyrinth," Simón Bolívar

Sometimes, mysterious things happen in large games like *Skyrim*. With all of those moving parts interacting with each other, the opportunity of a surprising event

occurring significantly increases. In this case, players encountered dead who shouldn't be dead. These are mysteries to be solved, and the player's postulation of possible causes represent a significant narrative effort on the part of the player.

Multiple players report finding Faendal mysteriously dead. He is a wood elf character who works for the lumber mill in the town of Riverwood. It is notable that his in-game story arc has a rivalry with another character in Riverwood name Sven. Shadowkitty reports "We were walking to Gerdurs house and there in the middle of the street, outside the Riverwood Trader was Faendal....dead! No idea why." The wondering why is interesting from a story standpoint. If an NPC dies off screen, then the player is left to wonder what happened. This creates moments for narrative extrapolation. Shadowkitty notes that "Camilla is beside herself, and I am pissed as I wanted him as a follower/trainer." In this description, the player notes the game opportunity that is lost. Faendal is an early companion possibility who has potential value because he can train the player in archery. However, the inclusion of Camilla (his romantic interest) in the story adds life to the scene. In game, Camilla very likely had little to no reaction. The elf's death was not a planned game-event, and therefore Camilla has no script. In the game, Camilla cannot express grief at this surprise death, but the player can certainly create it on her behalf. This additional detail serves to make the event more than random. It becomes more real as a result of the little flourish. In response to the previous player, Wildroses reminisces about also finding Faendal dead, "in the main street." However, Wildroses plays a bit of detective in this post, saying, "To this day I have no clue what killed him, but eventually concluded it was Sven." "To this day" indicates that the player has gone back to this moment repeatedly, wondering what could have happened. Blaming Sven serves as a narrative answer to this question. Sven, upset that Faendal is constantly in his way, takes

matters into his own hands, removing the pesky elf from Riverwood once and for all. This kind of speculation serves a similar function to the players who martyred themselves for the hopeless causes above. The game narrative provided no satisfactory answers, so they took the narrative into their own hands.

This urge to solve what must be a murder is a common theme in these mysterious death stories. Chadonraz points to a dead guard found on the road between Riverwood and Whiterun. The player marks off possible suspects. The reader is told that "I discovered his body as I headed to BFB (so, a dragon couldn't have killed him)." Random dragon encounters do not become possible until after Bleak Falls Barrow. This detail shows the player showcasing deductive reasoning, shaving suspects off the list. It couldn't have been a wolf as Chadonraz already killed the only one along that road. This reasoning through the problem shows the player trying to take control of a narrative which ultimately eludes his/her grasp.

On some occasions, it appears to be an open and shut case. Failed Reaper describes fining Freir standing over the body of Rorlund, a dagger on the ground. However, even when the details seem incredibly cut and dry, the player is left with more questions. The player says that "I wasn't expecting the death of Rorlund let alone what I believe was murder commited by Freir." What were the two of them doing in the Temple of the Divines? Is there significance to the murder taking place on hallowed ground? What could have led to this moment?

Procedurally, these events are likely all the result of erroneous spawning. On occasion, NPCs will appear high in the air instead of on the ground. In *Skyrim*, gravity affects all objects (usually), so the NPCs fall, and if they are not marked as essential, the fall kills them. However, this highly logical answer is not terribly satisfying. If the simplest answer is often the right

answer, the most scintillating one is the one we most want to believe. When we find a corpse in a game, it is so easy to assume foul play and begin to create a story. In reality, this leads to a rumor mill, and the story getting blown out of proportion. Players doing the exact same thing in their own stories is a simple matter of art imitating life.

"You are wonderful." Arthur Conan Doyle

By far, the most substantial posts were the 24 which detailed losing a companion. Players included considerable detail when explaining how these events occurred. Additionally, the tone of these posts was different from the previous categories. Largely, the other posts contained some combination of levity and matter-of-factness. There is an air of regret and loss in the following posts that is generally missing from the others.

For example, Amirthesavior, playing on legendary difficulty, describes a dragon slaying jaunt through the heart of Skyrim. The player notes having only a handful of potions, but points out that the follower, Jordis has dragonscale armor. Already, one can see the player making it clear that resources were low, but Amirthesavior took care in outfitting Jordis. This was simply outside the player's control. Of course, the dragon used fire shouts (Jordis is resistant to frost). We are told, "We sneaked past the dragon ,accidentally i pressed the shout bottom ,the dragon had spotted us." This mistake brought the dragon's might down upon them. The player goes on to say "it was the 16th of midyear.That the day i became a widower." This last detail, kept secret until the end of the post makes the post all the more poignant. The PC had a doubly close relationship to Jordis, both spouse and follower. The air of regret permeates the entire post. The narrative elements to this are clear. A mixture of poor planning and a worst possible moment

mistake led to the dragon finding them. Amirthesavior clearly expresses feelings of blame for what happened. The arc of the story showcases the player internalizing the events, while the unlucky draw on the shouts used by the dragon and the difficulty setting demonstrate that what actually happened was at least somewhat complicated.

When Frozenhero1 describes losing Faendal, the reader is given some framing about the kind of friend that the player was about to lose. "When I fought my first dragon, he was couragous and yelling words of encouragement like 'Die, Dragon!' and 'Kill it! Kill the Dragon!'" There is history here. Faendal was there for some important firsts for the player. In the telling, Frozenhero1 gives Faendal a good death. "I turned just in time to see him face off against a sabrecat. Before I could even begin to draw my weapon and join the fray, the giant cat clawed Faendral with two rapid strikes - killing Faendral dead on the spot." The cat was giant, and its attacks were rapid. This is to say that it was not the Elf's fault. He did not do anything wrong. The player goes on to describe killing the cat, skinning it and giving the pelt to Camilla, "telling her Faendral killed the cat but later died from his wounds. I just couldn't bear to tell her the truth." This little moment says a lot. The narrative itself is pure embellishment from a gameplay standpoint. As discussed earlier, Camilla will never actually ask what happened to Faendal, but that design failure does not stop the player from telling the story. This is because of course a true friend would tell the story that comforts those who are left behind.

The amount of backstory that players include when losing a companion is telling about what they mean in terms of the arc of the player story. When Randominis describes Janessa's death, the story is highly influenced by context. It begins with mistrust. This player is a "true son of Skyrim," and this detail heavily informs the prejudices that are imparted to the character. Randominis describes her as low born, something that a Nord very well might think of a

Dunmer. In the grand narrative of *Skyrim*, the Dunmer in Skyrim are there as refugees, their own kingdom of Morrowind devastated by the Oblivion Crisis. If anything, this story is one of overcoming those stereotypes though. The player explains that despite general animosity between their two peoples, "I saw a gleam in her eye, a hate for rules and a love for mischief. I took her on as my follower." This moment signifies seeing Janessa not as an archetype but an individual. Despite the player's negative opinions of Dark Elves, Randominis explains killing a few Nords for calling her the pejorative "Greyskin." Over time, the relationship blossomed into romance, and the two were wed. At this point, the narrative is about people coming together. However, these details are context. They explain to the audience what Janessa meant to Randominis. They ultimately make her death all the more tragic and pointless. The reader is told, "A few hours later, me and my new wife left the temple, heading home when we were confronted by a simple thief." Given that the Randominis makes a point of explaining that the two of them unseated the Imperial Legion together, being killed by a simple mugger makes the story all the more tragic, and that's the point. Janessa dying as the result of a randomly spawning enemy must have come as a surprise to the character, and this informs the story in some important ways. Met by fate and then separated by it.

The preceding player stories tend to lean into the tragedy in ways that were not expressed in the other categories, and part of this can likely be explained by looking at the stakes. When the player dies, nothing is really lost. The game reloads, and that is that. However, when a companion is lost, suddenly the player has a choice to make. How long has it been since they last saved? There is the possibility of significant lost progress. Additionally, there is the question of narrative purism. When the game forces a reload because the player dies, this is just the way the mechanics of the game function. However, when the player has the choice to erase

the death of a follower, this starts to feel a little like cheating. When a follower dies, the game recognizes this. It happened as far as the system is concerned. That difference matters. This leads to the question of how death impacts the player. I propose that the principle decider of how death affects a player is what is at stake.

Dead is Dead: Playing on Eggshells

In considering how consequences affect play, I turn to a player-imposed constraint on the game. The model that I use for this is "permadeath" or "dead is dead" (DID) play. Copic, McKenzie, and Hobbs point out that this was originally a "default gameplay mechanic" as games had real hardware limitations that made persistent memory difficult/impossible. As the technology improved, this model fell out of vogue as it "can inhibit player motivation and progression." However, as a gameplay model to explore perceptions of death in a game, playing dead is dead is an appealing prospect. In my primary character for *Skyrim*, Mittins, I certainly do not remember every time that she has died. It is likely less than twenty times, but the fact that I cannot clearly remember those moments feels significant. Thus, I played five dead is dead playthroughs in *Skyrim*. My constraints were simple. The game had to be played on legendary difficulty, thus imposing real danger, and when a character died, that was it. In naming the characters, I used a naming convention leftover from my World of Warcraft days, a random syllable followed by "thos." I will here discuss the two of those sessions: the shortest and the longest.

Figure 4.4: Bythos

This was my first foray into DID play, and Bythos was my first character. I painstakingly crafter her features, planning for her to be a mage. I gave Bythos eye markings that surely came from a past of magic and intrigue. I knew that as a high elf, she would be sympathetic to the Legion, and I reflected this in having her side with them during the opening scene. To say that trying to play as a magic user at level one on legendary is difficult is an understatement. Frantically, I ran around during the first encounter, peppering enemies with flaming hands and running away when my laughably low magika became low. I died during the second encounter. It took one hit to kill me. I very likely spent as much time designing Bythos and giving her a backstory as I did playing her. She was level one. However, as a simulation of a life or death experience, playing as Bythos was illuminating. Knowing that every sword swing could be her end made me cautious. When she died, I regretted asking her to use magic. Still this was a learning experience.

Figure 4.5: Chunthos

Chunthos was my most long-lived character. After suffering a couple of embarrassing deaths in the introductory dungeon[10], I opted to play things as carefully as possible. I picked up the first bow that I could find, keeping my distance and not having to worry about magika. After clearing the initial dungeon with stealth and projectiles, I ventured to Riverwood. Wolves on the side of the highway were suddenly terrifying. I knew that I needed some help. Who else could I hire but reliable old Faendal. I spilt firewood for gold, outfitting myself with better equipment and training with Faendal in archery. The relative safety of the town was alluring. There's danger in the wilderness. However, the Golden Claw was not going to retrieve itself, so I headed

[10] Rest in peace Grelthos and Morthos.

out with my new ally, always engaging enemies from stealth, ensuring that I get the sneak attack bonus.

Surely, I could handle the restless dead of Bleak Falls Barrow. At first, this was true. Between Faendal and me, our arrows were enough to put the undead back in the ground. Chunthos was actually clearing content. However, legendary mode does not forgive mistakes. I was pinned against a wall by a Restless Draugr. Burning through potions, I knew if I could just hold out, Faendal would whittle down the monster's health. It would have worked out, if only our ruckus did not bring more Draugrs into the fight. My healing was quickly outpaced by the enemies. Chunthos was cut down at level eight.

Playing DID was frustrating but enlightening. Kuznestova explains that "I noticed in the ways they evoked the feelings of powerlessness and lack of control or forced me to question my actions" (3). A character only getting one shot at every encounter forced me to play much more considerably than I normally would. However, it also made every minor victory significant. Moreover, it made defeat all the more impactful. This supports my suspicion that stakes have an impact on how players perceive death in a game. If every screen death is a narrative death, then the dangers of a given moment are all the more prescient. This is likely the reason that players have such a high degree of levity in many of the play stories that they share. If death means nothing, then its occurrence has as much impact as finding a piece of armor. If however, there is potential for permanence, as is the case when players lost a follower, then suddenly the moment has the ability to create a narrative with some staying power.

Conclusion

When players share stories of death, they are doing so as a way to connect with the reader, to understand what has happened. When they share a humorous and preposterous death, they do so because they suspect that other players have been there. When they share a moment that meaningfully changed the direction of their characters' lives, it is done to express a loss. In both cases, players are expressing emergent moments. The details are contextual and surprising, and the expression of those details often meaningfully expands on the game story. If we understand emergent narratives as players filling in the gaps where the game story leaves the player wanting, then stories of death have tremendous potential to accomplish this goal. After all, the game does not really recognize the death at all. But the player does. In the end, the player is the only real historian for these moments. If they do not tell these stories, then they may as well not have happened at all.

Admittedly, death in games is not the same as death in reality. At the onset of this chapter, I described my own struggles with encountering death, and death in games is not that. It would be strange if it were. To be clear, I am not making the argument that games cannot critically engage with important matters. Quite the contrary. Because the stakes are lower, because the player has the opportunity to explore, the stories that we tell about death in games open significant avenues for narrative. We can zoom in, slow down, and reflect. If death is an impossible, painful inevitability, then using storytelling from the games that we play is a means to understand something terrible. It is important to note the occurrence of these phenomenon in player stories as they represent a narrative link to something which we know a little about but often have considerably more questions than answers. There are plenty of moments in play which we do not see coming. In the case of death, it stands as emergent for precisely this reason.

The player is simply going about his/her business, and then suddenly they are not. The stories that players tell about this provide us insight into how they conceptualize the moment. Certainly, it is informed by the permanence (or lack thereof). When the death is a minor setback, we can certainly contextualize it under the failure model. However, the stories of it as a moment which cannot be undone give us something else. The narratives which hold onto a moment that cannot be gotten back remind us, even if less fiercely so, that sometimes there are no second chances. Take the next step carefully, they forewarn.

CHAPTER 5: I SWEAR IT WAS LIKE THAT WHEN I GOT HERE

"It happens when they change something." –Trinity

When I was a child, one of my favorite games was *Dragon Warrior IV*[11]. For those that do not remember, it's a turn based roleplaying game that from a mechanical standpoint was not all that special. There were some game elements improved upon since *III*, but the thing that really stood out was the story structure. The game was divided into five chapters, with the first four being self-contained narratives with new characters. All of these disparate tales converge in the fifth chapter. The game itself was fairly difficult for me at the time, but if I am looking for the origin of my love of story in games, *Dragon Warrior IV* is as good a place as any to start. However, in the current context, I bring up this game because it was also the first time I broke a game by cheating.

In order to cheat in cartridge games such as the original Nintendo, tools such as the Game Genie were required. The player would connect both the console and cartridge to the Game Genie, using it as a bridge. Retro Game Mechanics Explained points out that the tool works by intercepting communication between console and cartridge, changing the memory addresses that are exchanged between the two. Essentially, when the player inputs a code to the Genie, it changes where the system looks for code. This can alter games in some interesting ways. However, the current discourse on using cheats in a game tends to focus on the act as dishonesty. Hamlen draws parallels between cheating in games and cheating in other aspects of life, saying that student players "bypass the difficult practice or work required in a video game and use

[11] Branded as such in the U.S. Remakes of the game call it *Dragon Quest IV*

alternative methods to reach their goals" (1150). The issue here is the model of cheating as a means to get ahead, instead of cheating as playfully manipulating a system to create unexpected outcomes. As a kind of midway approach, Consalvo posits the line for what is truly cheating is the ability for a party to be wronged in some way. Putting the player at the center of this discussion, she defines cheating as "the introduction of deception and possible chaos into the game world, which is shared with other players" (92). While she addresses other perceptions of the term in her book, Consalvo's use of this utilitarian conception of cheating is compelling. Ultimately, this view forwards the idea that manipulating a single-player game cannot really be cheating, as it is impossible for anyone to suffer from the alterations made by the player. Kueklich takes this idea further, noting "[g]ames should be regarded not only as texts in which cheats can be used to skip certain passages, it also is media that foster new forms of symbolic interaction between individuals, and as cybernetic systems, in which cheating performs a sort of 're-entry' of the environment in the system itself" (4). To address the issue head-on, using cheats in a game can be getting around the system in a way that is harmful, but this is certainly not the only way to view it. In the example below, I modified the game's operations with a cheat because the play experience became more unpredictable, because it made the game more interesting.

Probably, one of the most fascinating changes for *Dragon Warrior IV* swapped the construction of the town. Every tile that should have been a road becomes a treasure chest with random contents. This creates some degree of tension as many chests contain mundane items, but a few have powerful legendary weapons and others contain monsters such as the mimic which will easily kill a low-level player. Thus, the careful balance of the game is thrown out in two ways. The player has the potential to become much more powerful, but also has the

potential to be annihilated. The issue arises if the player happens to open a chest with a quest item (like I did). When a chest is opened, that chest is associated with a specific memory location. Thus, when the Ragnar, from Chapter 1, has the Gunpowder Jar in his inventory, Nara and Mara will find only an empty chest where it should be, stranding them, and making progress further in the game impossible.

Realizing that a choice made in the first chapter has implications that ruin the playthrough in the fourth chapter is frustrating. However, that change does fundamentally alter the imposed narrative of the game. These sisters can never expose Keeleon's nefarious plot. They can never set up the events which lead the game's hero to his/her destiny. Early avarice in making those treasure chests appear creates a dystopic world where good cannot prevail. This alteration subverts the traditional good triumphs over evil story in some important ways. When I broke my save on *Dragon Warrior IV* all those years ago, I did not know that I was experiencing a prescient emergent narrative. I was simply upset that hours of play were wasted. However, looking back on that memory, all I can see is how the changes I made in the root directory altered the story the game tells, perhaps even making it more interesting for the possibilities it opens up.

It is with this in mind that I direct my focus to the game not functioning as intended. This chapter will examine glitches, exploits, cheats, and mods. My discussion of emergent narrative thus far has looked at the story the player tells while operating within the framework of a rule system. Here, I expand that conversation to explicitly examine the rule system itself. What kinds of stories are told when all systems are not optimal?

To be clear, this chapter discusses a number of different threads. Glitching is not necessarily cheating, and a mod changes the game when it functions as intended (i.e. not a glitch). However, the common thread is a shift which alters play (SWAP hereafter). In individual sections, I will refer to individual units by their names, but when I am discussing them more generally as game states for which the developers did not plan, the acronym SWAP will be used. These can take numerous forms and be introduced by the developer, player, or some combination of the two. Boluk and Lemieux point to an interesting iteration of this phenomenon, multigame playthroughs. Essentially this is hallmarked by "single input" and "multiple output" (184). The player has multiple games open at the same time, and their keyboard inputs cause the character in each game to move. Not unlike playing *Dark Side of the Moon* during a viewing of *Wizar*d *of Oz*, the key to these examples is synch up. If one is playing *Super Mario Bros* I through III simultaneously, one screen requires a leap over a cliff which might just end a different screen directly on top of a piranha plant on another. This kind of remix play certainly is meant to showcase the skills of the player, but as a SWAP, it does something else. Because the player is suddenly playing multiple games at the same time, the context changes. At the level of each individual game, the execution of the code is untouched. However, by stacking multiple games on top of each other, the player suddenly has considerably more to consider for each individual action. Because of these changes in the way that the player engages with the game, the game is suddenly something quite unfamiliar. My ultimate purpose for this chapter is to demonstrate how the expression of emergent narrative is changed by a game state which violates the ruleset outlined by the game's developers.

Rules Are Meant to Be Enforced

In order to understand how players change the game, it would be prudent to briefly discuss the framework of a game's rule system. Juul succinctly captures this, saying that "The rules of a game also *set up potential actions*, actions that are meaningful inside the game but meaningless outside" (58). In practice, Juul is describing the most basic element of the game. Deep below the level of interface, the game is a system of rules which govern behavior on the screen. In games, the basic logic is kept in the code. Pressing the arrow key to move a character, what happens when two objects collide with each other, under what circumstances the game can be won or lost: these are the elements of the rules. Nardi and Kallinkos posit that keeping things hidden, blackboxing them can have disastrous consequences in terms of possibility. They argue that this is "the antithesis of play." There is merit to this position, but I contest that it is not entirely a bad thing. Blackboxing the internal logic of a particular game is part of what makes it playable in the first place. If I could make *Dig Dug* about space exploration, it would very likely not be *Dig Dug* any more (more on that when I discuss modding). When Juul says that it sets up potential action, he is saying that the rules tell the player what they both can and cannot do. Along the same thread, Bogost notes that "game engines regulate individual videogames' artistic, cultural, and narrative expression" (56). Essentially, the core of the game is the set of instructions which regulate everything else.

At a level above this are the objects, individual units within the game which function as a result of the rule system. We do not fall through the floor in a game because our character is given a rigid body and the floor is considered a collider. These kinds of rules outline what available actions are built into the game. DeLeon points out that circumstances we take for granted, such as gravity, are not immutable laws in the same way that they are in reality. He

notes, “these physical circumstances must be implemented at the same level as the game's rules” (4). Thus, when designers outline the terms of play, they must also ensure that affordances we take for granted are included. If the rules rigidly lay out what can and cannot be in a game, then the individual game objects set up the much richer possibility space for the game. Juul points out that “That rules and gameplay are asymmetrical, and that emergence games give the player freedom to play a game using different strategies, are in many ways flip sides of the same coin” (77). In most cases, this is a one-way street. The rule system is authoritarian. Lava kills the player every time. Finding food lying on the ground restores lost health. However, we have the choice as to how we handle that situation. This is well summarized by McKitrick who explains, “Player agency is the combination of different elements of a game's design that give players control over certain aspects of their gameplay experience.” We have a choice in how we interact with the game system. The more complex or open the system, the more choices the player has. For a complex system, this often manifests in increased options of how to handle a particular moment. For an open system, the broader question of where to go/what to do is left up to the player. In either case, that possibility is contingent upon a rule system functioning as intended.

This is well manifested in *Skyrim,* for example. Colliders and hit boxes ensure that weapons work like weapons. More complex scripts ensure that a door loads the area that it should load instead of taking the player somewhere else entirely. The only reason that a dragon is able to land on the ground and try to eat the player is because there is a rule system in place that allows for it. Juul explains it as follows: “gameplay is not a mirror of the rules of a game, but a consequence of the game rules and the dispositions of the game players” (88). To put this another way, the reason that we are able to play a game is because there are rules that allow it to happen. When the rules are functioning as intended, play feels natural. When the rules are either

poorly designed or malfunctioning, we become more aware of them. When examining the function of such systems, one of the approaches proposed by Bogost is cellular automata. This looks at individual units within the system as interacting with their neighbors (94). In practice, this imagining a game's rules system as an organism allows us to see how one part of the game going wrong can have far reaching consequences throughout the system.

In the example that I opened with, I disturbed multiple memory locations when I opened the chest containing the Gunpowder Jar in the first chapter. Rules that are functioning correctly can still cause problems when we use this outlook. The game (correctly) checked to see if I had already collected the item when it loaded the dungeon where it should have been. It (again correctly) saw that I had, likely through a variable that was turned either on or off. However, the rule system had no way of accounting for a character who, at this point in the game, could never be in my party having the item. Thus, when a SWAP is introduced, the planning of the game's designers ceases to be the only force that is operating at the level of rules. In addition to the tightly controlled rules system created by the developers, new possibilities enter at the level of rule. Because these systems function like organisms, with multiple systems interdependent upon one another, the introduction of even small changes can have far reaching consequences. It is with this in mind, that I here move my discussion to glitches and glitching.

When Things Go Wrong

Perhaps the simplest way to define a glitch is when something goes wrong in the execution of the game. Of course, when encountering a glitch in the wild, players recognize the phenomenon as such. However, pinning down exactly what constitutes a glitch takes a bit more

work. Švelch argues that a "glitch has been established as an unpredictable quirk of a machine, most often quite annoying to people" (55-6). With this conception, unpredictability and frustration are inherent in the concept of a glitch. Certainly, *Skyrim* has its share of issues like this. For instance, Players consistently noted that entering Lakeview Manor would often lead to crashes ("Hearthfire, Lakeview"). The crux of this error is as follows. The houses added in the Hearthfire DLC focused heavily on allowing the player to showcase the treasures which they have encountered throughout their travels. The player is able to create multiple customizable wings in these houses. In my character's, Mittins, Lakeview Manor, I built trophy room as well as an armory. Additionally, I created a rather sizable treasure pile which contains the jewels and bobbles which I had encountered during my journey throughout Skyrim. Figure 5.1 demonstrates a partial view of my armory.

Figure 5.1 A Weapon for Every Occasion

This is only one view of the room. Behind my character's view in this frame are several more weapon racks and mannequins. The purpose of a room like this is to showcase unique equipment that the player has accrued through completing long/difficult quests. What is important here is how memory allocation works in these houses. Each mannequin is wearing boots, armor, gloves, and helmet. The right most display rack is holding two staves and a shield. When the player enters his/her home, every single piece of equipment has to be loaded by the system. That treasure pile mentioned above has to be loaded one piece at a time. The reason that players often experience a crash in Lakeview Manor is because the system attempts to load all of these items at the same time, and, overwhelmed by that task, it throws up its hands and force closes the application.

At the level of rules, the system is functioning exactly as it should. Rather than risk damaging the hardware, the system simply stops working. From the player's perspective, this is of course wrong. It is certainly frustrating. However, when we think of a glitch, there is at least a partial perspective that someone has made a mistake on the design side. In this case, designers did not account for the memory demands of players' decorating enthusiasm. Švelch's conception of what constitutes a glitch holds true here, but what about the wandering mannequin (Figure 5.2)? Just as with the crashing glitch, the design ultimately led to mannequins just leaving their post and wandering around the player's home. One of the player's sampled for this chapter says "I'll be the first to say it. Mannequins." This is telling. These humanoid objects leaving their stands is sufficiently ubiquitous that the poster assumes that the audience will know exactly what this means.

Figure 5.2: The Case of the Haunted Display Case

The issue comes from the model for the mannequin being the same model used to display characters who are capable of movement. However, this post is not drawing attention to something that is annoying. This is posted in a thread for funny or spooky occurrences within the game. My point is that while some glitches can be frustrating, others bring value to the play experience. When I first saw that a glorified armor rack had moved from its rightful place, I was not angry at the system for this. I was unnerved. I walked around the mannequin carefully, not wanting to turn my back on it. This small moment informed the narrative which I was experiencing in my playthrough. I noted my photo journal, Three Hundred Days in the North, in the first chapter. When composing it, strange occurrences such as this greatly informed the "Ill Tidings" entry. These glitches enhanced my experience of the narrative.

It is therefore difficult to concede that the experience of the player can be a criterion for identifying glitches. Treating them as categorical, Bainbridge and Bainbridge discuss glitches in

terms of their effective cause. They identify three major glitch causes: model discrepancy, programming, and unanticipated input (68). These descriptive terms help outline what a glitch looks like. A model discrepancy occurs when a game object does not act the way that it should as outlined below in Figure 5.3.

Figure 5.3: Glitches in Skyrim

The top-left image is the player riding a dragon, but the dragon has gone through the ground, continuing to fly uninhibited by this. On the programming side (top-right), some issue with the programming has gone awry. Here, there is a script which is executed during a murder investigation quest. The player is able to search this house for clues, and after the quest is complete, the player is able to purchase and furnish it. However, the script here launches after the player has already changed the home's interior. Thus, the prompts refer to objects that no longer exist. In the case of unanticipated input (bottom-left), the game is correctly executing the

code, but it is doing so (for one reason or another) at an inappropriate time. Here, the game has erroneously begun to execute physics on the cart from the game's opening sequence. The result is that the leisurely cart ride which begins the game is instead a nauseating rollercoaster from which the player cannot leave. Each of these categories does cover a large number of the glitches that a player could encounter over the course of a game, but they do not necessarily catch everything. To this list, I would add the category of anomalous interaction (bottom-right). When the code and physics of the game are functioning as expected, but some anomaly for which the developers did not account occurs, interesting situations arise. Here, the player, as well as two skeletons are at the bottom of a body of water. However, the game believes them to be standing on solid ground, and it treats the situation as such. I add this category to account for emergent situations which arise throughout gameplay. These are the moments that ultimately make for emergent glitch narratives.

The previous three examples are how we often discuss the glitch. They are something which happens which is meant to be avoided. Something has gone wrong. Gaoriunova and Shylgin note that "Glitches are usually regarded as marginal" (110). However, this conception assumes that the plans of a game's developers are the only real way that we should experience games. In her manifesto on glitches, Menkan begs to differ. She argues "the gospel of glitch art also tells about new norms implemented by corruption." The idea here is that something going wrong is a good thing. In practice, players certainly treat glitches this way. There is perhaps no more apparent implementation of this than in the practice of glitching.

Is It Broken or Just Different?

In the popular discussion of video games, a distinction must be made between two closely related SWAPs. A glitch, as discussed above, is the product of the system. Glitching is what the player does with this phenomenon. In the *Elder Scrolls* series, one of the most famous examples is the floating paintbrush ("Paintbrush Trick?"). Developers neglected to make gravity affect the paintbrush item in *Oblivion*, and it therefore would simply float wherever a player left it. Industrious players practiced glitching by building elaborate staircases out of multiple brushes, allowing them to reach locations which would have been otherwise unavailable. This allows for players to complete the game considerably more quickly. In one example, a player is able to reach the end credits in just under three minutes by building a staircase with paintbrushes into an area which triggers the game's ending scene, thus skipping the vast majority of the game's content. In communities that "speed run" a game, glitching serves as a way to recontextualize the game experience. Francis explains that "Players compete with each other for high scores and fast run-throughs, but they're also developing strategies, socializing, and organizing around these specialized playthroughs, all while audiences watch for the joy and thrill of crazily high-skilled gameplay." When a player is performing a speed run, the original purpose of the game becomes secondary. *Oblivion* is no longer a fantasy roleplaying game but a mad dash to the finish. Considering how glitching plays into the experience of a game, Holmes notes that "the meanings we attach to the anonymous presence of objects in videogames are inscribed with unconscious desire." In essence, the paintbrush is not a random, even mundane, in-game object anymore. It is a means to go places and do things that would otherwise be impossible. When a glitch opens up the possibility space of play, it can become a feature of the game, an aberration of evolution that proves useful and therefore sticks around. Boluk and Lemieux note

that when players are glitching in this fashion, "the mechanics of the game extend well beyond what is outlined on carefully constructed pages" (45). In effect, when players find ways to cause unintended effects in a game, they are changing the face of the adventure, making it their own.

Players Tell Tales of Glitches Terrifying and Titillating

Thus, it is prudent to circle back to the concept of emergent narrative. I have been making the case that emergent narrative is the product of players creating stories that were never imagined by the game's designers. It stands to reason that if the designers made a mistake in programming, then the ramifications of that mistake are quite difficult to see coming. Referring back to Bogost's discussion of cellular automata, a tiny mistake in the program ripples outward, affecting numerous other systems as it does. As much as the rules, the player is a part of that system. As long as the glitch is not fatal, we tend to assign meaning to it, even when we know that something has gone awry. In the following discussion, I will examine player stories of glitches sampled from a hundred discussion board posts. A common theme from players, in both their selection and discussion is that they tend to attempt to make sense of these events even as they admit their recognition of the system not working as intended.

Neither Modern Science nor Philosophy Can Explain What Life Is

There are a lot of ways that a game can show that an enemy has died. It can disappear, it can be replaced with some marker to indicate an enemy used to be here, or it can simply stop moving. *Skyrim* uses the latter of these options. When any character's health drops to zero, it falls to the ground and is "dead" (the exception being characters marked as "essential" who drop down to one knee while breathing heavily). The game does not really know what dead is. A

variable value changes and the entity just stops executing its AI. However, sometimes this process goes wrong. One player rather succinctly explains how it feels to have something like this happen. GastonBastardo says "Kill Hagraven./Loot Hagraven's head for a quest./Decapitated Hagraven corpse immediately stands up./Take a break from playing to change pants." While presented as humorous, the implications of this are clear. This player had a set of expectations that were laid out by the game. When one kills a monster, that's it. Pick up the head, the body is safe now. Thus, the jump scare of a headless corpse getting back up would certainly be jarring. Even though this post is quite short, it conveys the narrative tension of a real moment of fear. Certainly, with reflection, a player can understand that something went wrong with the system. However, the surprise of this moment raises the same kind of primal fears that make the hairs on the back of the neck stand up in a graveyard at night. This effect is achieved by the game violating its own established rules about what it means for a character to be alive. The effect is unexpected, and it has all the more impact for being so.

The rules of death not quite sticking were a common theme among the posts which I sampled. Captain Chemosh told a tale of encountering an old friend wandering around Skyrim. For context, the player explained that "my character already finished the companions." This detail is significant because a number of the Companions die during this quest chain. The player goes on "what do I see but Skjor! Yes, good old dead Skjor... traveling slowly over the ground with invisible greatsword in hand and everything from his waist down merged into the land." Seeing a dead man half in the ground with a spectral weapon would be jarring enough on its own, but Captain Chemosh has more to say. Apparently, Skjor has some unfinished business, as he wanders into a bandit camp and proceeds to kill everyone there. The player notes "turns out that bandits are unable to attack handicapped zombies but the feeling isn't mutual." It is

somewhat easy to diagnose what happened in this moment. The game registered Skjor as dead, and the combat AI prevents NPCs from attacking the dead. This is very likely so that they can effectively target opponents that are still a viable threat. Thus, the bandits ignored him. However, since Skjor was executing the same combat protocols, he engaged the very much alive bandits. The player spent hours watching Skjor wander about in this manner before (re)killing him "at which point he vanished into nothingness." Even understanding what went wrong with the execution of rules, the narrative is fascinating. The player encounters a dead companion, and he is still doing the work of his former guild. This is a moment where context heavily informs the narrative. The Companions work as mercenaries, but much more importantly, their primary objective is to keep the people of Skyrim safe. After a tragic death, Skjor's spirit became restless. He rose from the dead, plagued by the memories of his violent death, to continue the grim task of vanquishing evil. The player, seeing the dead Nord's suffering at odds with his noble heart, laid him to rest. The glitch creates the possibility for a story with stakes, conflict, and resolution.

Sometimes, the issue is not that the dead return. There are occasions when, for whatever reason, an NPC simply refuses to die. Pyramid Head explains that this happened with a humble chicken. The player was engaged with a dragon in combat, and the dragon opted to ignore the player. Pyramid Head says that "the dragon began attacking a chicken that weirdly enough never died even though it took me two minutes to bring the dragon down." The scene is frankly ludicrous. Dragons, beings so powerful that their return hearkens the end of the world, are strong. Chickens die from a single arrow. However, this stalwart chicken stood against magical breath attacks and massive teeth, keeping the creature distracted long enough for the player to whittle down its health. Strange occurrences like this make the world more alive. There are

events occurring that the player cannot understand, and this is certainly one of them. What made that chicken so special? In this case, the fact that something was truly amiss here is the result of two glitches occurring in close succession. One of the more typical glitches, Pyramid Head notes "of course afterwards i got the typical dancing dragon glitch once i devoured it's soul." The "dancing dragon" glitch occurs as a result of the palette swap on the dragon when it dies. To show that the player has consumed the dragon's soul, the flesh burns off the dragon's body, leaving only the bones. When this transition happens, the dragon bones, quite often begin moving around in an uncoordinated fashion, more of a flop really. The additive nature of these events contributes to the emergent nature of the narrative. One strange thing happening is weird. An invincible chicken distracting a dragon whose bones dance upon death…Something strange is afoot. Inherently, we recognize that the events are unrelated at the level of rules, however, we want to make meaning, and when our expectations are challenged, we want to know why.

Hold Up, Dude, My Body's Changing!

Because they are well rendered and consistent, it is easy to forget that a floor or a wall in a game is only solid because the designers told it to be. The difference between a background image through which the player can move and a solid object which will obstruct the player's path is really just a property being checked or unchecked. We buy the illusion because it seems to follow the same rules as our world. However, we only believe the simulation until it breaks down. When it does, we begin to question other assumptions that we have made. It is therefore not surprising that many of these glitch stories have an element of horror. Spenser6 notes just such an occurrence. "I was walking through some ruins, happened upon a Giant Frostbite

spider." Giant spiders, while terrifying in reality, are expected in a fantasy adventure. Thus, the player does not bat an eye at killing the beast. The corpse glitches into a wall. Surprising, but not frightening. The effect of this is that one can simply not see the dead body anymore. However, the reader can assume more is comping when Spenser6 explains "a minute later, I'm walking in a small confined tunnel." That is not an auspicious detail. Very likely, the player had forgotten that the previous spider corpse had moved into the wall. Thus, "Glitched through the wall, spider-ey limbs flailing wildly, making this crunching noise..." The flailing limbs are bad enough, coming out of the walls in a way that would make one uncomfortable leaning against a surface forever, but the added auditory element makes it worse. Once more, we have little details that add up to something more. In the moment, it does not occur to the player that the corpse is just settling into place while colliding with a wall that it can only somewhat pass through. The reality does not matter nearly as much as the sight of spider limbs spilling through a wall while a crunching sound permeates the room.

The fact that multiple players experience Skjor related issues is perhaps telling. In this case, Evilcaribou points to a similar beginning setup. The Nord is coming half-way out of the ground, milling about on the road. However, this Skjor seems more interested in conversation, telling the player "You still have to prove yourself, whelp." In this instance, the Nord believes that the player is still in the hall of the companions and is making conversation. This is a standard dialog option for Skjor. Because he dies before the player "proves themselves" there was no need to give the character any updated dialog. In this case, he was stuck in the past, unable to move beyond his own death. Though the Skjor described in the previous section could be killed, but Evilcaribou's could not. The player explains, "I tried using Unrelenting Force on him and cast Flames on him to see what would happen, and it had no effect whatsoever." Once

more, we see a player encountering a mystery and approaching with curiosity. Here, a character, stuck in the ground and apparently invincible, wanders about, until he disappears without a trace. There is no closure to be had, no rhyme or reason.

In some cases, due perhaps to a loop, a player's problems only multiply. Voidrunner points to another character found stuck in the ground, in this case, "I see Louis on horseback stuck half in the ground." However, there is apparently a separate glitch associated with this particular NPC. The player leaves Latrush and horse to their earthen fate, only to return to find "two copies of Louis, one stuck in the ground and other standing." The next time there are three copies of this character just waiting around. The reliability/replicability of this glitch is interesting because the player knows it will continue to happen even as they recognize that it is not supposed to. Reflecting on the events, Voidrunner muses, "that was on an old playthrough so he never got a chance to take over the world, I think I'll be avoiding his quest in future." There are not diminishing returns on a glitch such as this. In the beginning, it all seems harmless, a character on a horse, sitting in the ground. When there are two, things are strange, but still somewhat whimsical. However, the player can easily imagine dozens more, hundreds, a sea of the same NPC spilling forth until there is only Louis Latrush. This imagining of possibilities colors the entire experience. In these kinds of stories, players see a world that is broken. The see characters pushing through solid objects, flailing, multiplying, and they recognize that this world only makes sense when there is some truth on which to rely. Thus, they tell the story, rationalize it. The UFO was a weather balloon. The Will-O-Wisp was just igniting swamp gas. Like these examples from reality, the explanations make sense. They are plausible. However, imagining the possibilities is considerably more fun. Thus, we create narratives which

are more interesting, even as we concede that it was probably something considerably more mundane.

My Old Computer Is Going to Drag This Family Down into The Depths of Chaos

The physics in any open-world game with lots of activities the player can do is somewhat complicated. Between, gravity, momentum, acceleration, and collision, there are numerous things that the game must track when the player does something as simple as running or jumping. The more variables that the player adds, the more likely that something will go wrong. It is therefore not too surprising that players had physics related stories to share. NewbieN00b notes an instance of jumping off the side of a mountain while on horseback. The game is tracking momentum and gravity for both the player and the horse separately. The player explains that the horse dies, sending NewbieN00b tumbling. The player explains that "I got really lucky and managed to roll into the mine." When something like this occurs, the player changes zones. With numerous variables being tracked, changing zones can be precarious. This is because if the game is not taking steps to make sure the values in those variables are preserved, data can be lost. This is exactly what occurred with the player. The player tells us "my character was stuck in the falling pose. I was sliding around on the floor, couldn't draw weapons, or anything." The game held onto some of the values through the transition, but not all of them. Thus, NewbieN00b was trapped in a limbo between falling and crashing into the ground.

Horses, likely because they add a step in the process, seem to compound issues whenever they are present. Goofstoff tells a story of shooting a hunter who was on horseback, as the NPC

attempted to get off the horse, “began to slowly rise into the sky. At about 20 feet, he began to hover for 20-30 seconds, before suddenly plummeting to his death.” I will not even begin to guess what would cause this, but the simple fact is that something went wrong in the process of getting off the horse while engaged in combat. The question of what went wrong is infinitely less important here then what happened. The dramatic action of rising up in the sky when engaged: who is this mysterious equine wizard. The fact that this hunter hovered in the air for a while before the game remembered gravity extends this. The anti-climax of it all plays with expectations. Suddenly, this is not an all-powerful sage with mysterious powers. It is just some hunter who encountered forces far beyond control that led to an embarrassing death.

These glitch stories often leave more questions than answers, and this is quite true with Chickenfeed, who reminisces, “I will never forget Levitator and his Moonwalking Army.” This is one of those moments that must simply be read in its original form. Chickenfeed explains:

> A group of the Imperial Legion Dance Group was moonwalking down the road with a Stormcloak Prisoner. After they pass me, the one at the rear stops and looks into my eyes. "Keep out of this" he says, before promptly levitating into the sky and disappearing into the clouds.

For context, these are soldiers in the middle of a war who are transporting an enemy combatant. If the opening scene of the game is any indication, this prisoner is going to be executed as soon as they reach an Imperial base. The walking animation could not have picked a less appropriate time to malfunction into a moonwalk. The deadpan delivery of “Keep out of this” juxtaposed against these soldiers dancing across the land is frankly delightful. The already excessive scene going over the top with one more glitch is the cherry on top of this story. The Imperial trooper simply floats away after delivering a menacing message. This is emergent narrative. The story works because the audience knows about the war. It works because it completely reverses the

story that the designers set out to tell. It leaves a lasting impression on the player, and by extension the reader, while being completely forgotten by the system the moment that it is finished happening.

I Invited Them to Stick Around Instead of Coming Up When They Were Logically Supposed To

When players are interacting with NPCs for story reasons, the burden of keeping the narrative coherent can be reduced to the level of rules in the sense that the narrative falls apart if something glitches. These in-game social situations can have quite a bit of information that the game should be remembering in order for the relationships to feel organic. When something goes wrong, the intended narrative very quickly falls apart. For example, I have mentioned in previous chapters that one of the ways the game works to feel real is to track the players actions and present consequences later on. Kill an NPC, and a grief-stricken loved one might hire thugs to rough you up. This happened to Konydanza. The player accidentally killed a stable owner while fighting a dragon. "Fast forward an hour or so, as I'm leaving Yngol Barrow. I step out the door, and I hear 'We're here to teach you a lesson.'" This is expected. The hired thugs should have attempted to teach the player a lesson. However, they opted to teach Konydanza a lesson in friendship. Instead of attacking on sight, the thugs display "[n]o signs of aggression, just chillin. I talk to one of them, and they give the typical non-aggressive NPC dialogue." They proceed to just follow the player around, even going so far as to attack bandits the player encounters. The player notes that these NPCs should have attempted murder. "Instead, I guess they decided I was cool enough to go exploring with for a while." This issue is clearly something going wrong in the game's execution. However, at the narrative level, it tracks. The player emerges from a

barrow, dens of the undead that inspire superstitious fear in the locals, likely covered in blood from the struggle underground. These thugs know that they are supposed to kill the player, but they very likely assessed the situation, recognized that this would just lead to death, and switched teams. Mercenaries live by their reputation, yet dead mercenaries do not get paid. This min-narrative was crafted by the game as a way to show the player that there are consequences for their actions. Instead, the glitch made this a moment in which the player proved to the system that there actually are not. Once more, the narrative force lies in the reversal, and it works.

If the previous player story represents the player overcoming the intention of the system, WooglyOogly's demonstrates that the sword cuts both ways. This player tells the story of a wife kidnapped by bandits, something that occasionally happens in the Hearthfire expansion when the player lives on the frontier. The setup is fairly simple. The player either pays the bounty or kills the bandits, then the spouse returns home. WooglyOogly approaches the enemy stronghold from above, and "I fell kind of through a hole that should have been more obvious, onto the bandit leader's head. I killed her, and everyone else in the mine." The player messed up the script of this encounter by not using the front door. The game simply had no idea what to do with this information. Certainly, the bandits were dead, but the appropriate triggers had not been activated. Thus, "when I got to my wife, she wouldn't give me anything but the standard dialog and she wouldn't stop walking backwards against a cave wall." From a narrative standpoint, this could be read as trauma. Kidnapped, kept in a cave, threated, the NPC simply dissociated, pretended everything is fine as she slowly backed away from any person she encountered. She did eventually go home though. However, the player could not get her to engage in a dialog. Literally, the dialog box for conversation would not open up. The player, in a staggering overreaction, decided that killing the spouse and remarrying was the best option. We are told

“She was in bed and our children were sleeping across the room and I felt so terrible, but I crouched down and shot her. She caught fire and told me to stop, but she didn't die.” Attempted murder apparently did the trick as the spouse now has full dialog options, though she still walks backwards. The details of this narrative string together fairly effectively. After her harrowing experience, this woman eventually returns home, a place that should be safe. She disengages with meaningful relationships because that is a perfectly natural thing to do after a trauma. The player opts for more abuse to solve this problem. In a life ruled by fear, she now gives her spouse the attention that warranted immolation, but she will never turn her back to the player again. The story is certainly dark, but in a world where the punishment for murder is a fine, the wife’s reaction makes perfect sense. Nowhere is safe for her.

When taken together, it is clear that the initial cause of these player stories is the glitch itself. However, their reaction has everything to do with the context. As long as the glitch does not cause a crash, players are largely able to simply run with it. They tell stories about what happens in the exact same way they would describe business as usual in the game. Yes, the glitches violate the game’s rules, but that just increases the pull to make sense of them. We want our stories to make some kind of sense. If it is the case that that sense comes after the fact, so be it. These kinds of stories about glitches work precisely because the player is dissatisfied with the lack of closure provided by the system. This idea that the game is not the be all and end all for where a player can get story makes sense, and it permeates all aspects of the SWAP. It is ultimately this motivation that leads players to modify the game itself.

Modders in the North

At its core, a mod represents an attempt on the part of the player to not just author their own story, but to create some degree of permanence and spreadability for their additions to the canon of a game. Mods are independently produced additions to games that build off of the game's core architecture. The trend can be traced all the way back to the beginning of video games. Christiansen notes that *Spacewar!* Was originally developed by people working at multiple labs and all doing their work for no pay (32). The labor on these products is often marginal and rarely, if ever, lucrative. The work becomes more demanding over time as well. Christiansen explains that the work of modding, requires "more and more a noticeable and significantly intentional change to the gameplay and experience of the game itself" than in the past (12). At its core, modding is a labor of love. Fans produce new content because they want to see new content. While there has been some successful sponsorship on the part of industry, the history of modding is one fraught with conflict. Kow and Nardi point out that companies have historically been contentious of modding, bringing lawsuits to get the mods banned and updating the software to render the mods inoperable.

Despite all of the interference and lack of payment, modders continue their work, producing new features and content for games. Hector notes that this can take the form of changes in the rules of the game, the landscape, or the look of the characters (301). If sufficiently complex, the mod can completely change the game. Underberg notes that *Neverwinter Nights* has been modded to be an educational simulation for Ybor City (63). Fassbender similarly notes that the Elder Scrolls Construction kit was used to teach about the Macquarie Lighthouse (75-8). Mods represent an opportunity for players to create new adventures in familiar lands or to build entirely new worlds. These moments serve as

opportunities to showcase the blurry line between developer and player. It is with this in mind that I here discuss some of the kinds of mods which exist for *Skyrim*. To be clear, there are thousands of mods. My sampling process was neither random nor representative. My only selection criterion was that the mod demonstrate the emergent narrative potential which exists in mods. It is with this in mind that I discuss the following mods.

Enter the Strange

Call of Trainwiz, created by modder, Trainwiz, is demonstrated in Figure 5.4.

Figure 5.4: Train Rain

The player learns a new shout, modeled after the meteor shower shout used by the game's main villain, Alduin. Unlike the dragon's version, the player calls down a storm of trains which crash

into the ground and explode. The premise is perhaps a bit silly, but the execution is polished. The mod includes train sounds, and the trains cause quite a bit of damage when they make contact with NPCs. At the level of gameplay, this creates a much different experience. Simply call down a storm of trains for whatever problems one encounters. Of course, when I used this mod, I had to use it in a town. People were none too pleased with my antics, but this raises an interesting point. The mod essentially unlocks tremendous power for the player, and it took me maybe five minutes to abuse it. Compare this with Macho Dragons created by Gir489 (Figure 5.5).

Figure 5.5: Macho Dragon

Where Figure 5.4 represents a real change in the gameplay, this macho dragon does not actually change the mechanics of the game. The dragon, modeled after wrestler and meat stick spokesperson, Macho Man Randy Savage, looks different, and it samples sound of Savage when

attacking, but the fight is essentially just a regular dragon fight at the level of rules, the tone of the encounter is dramatically shifted. It is virtually impossible to take this fight seriously. Thus, a moment of dramatic tension as created by the game's designers become something entirely silly due to the change.

These mods represent a change in the game world while still preserving the core game of *Skyrim*. In both cases, players are being asked to fight in the war and defeat Alduin. However, the changes nonetheless change the experience, and it has everything to do with the question of authorship. When these cosmetic mods are introduced, there are actually three authors present. There is the game, the player, and the modder. Each is brining something to the table, and the stories which arise could have likely been planned by none.

Content with Content

For the extremely dedicated Modders, the possibility exists to create entirely new content in *Skyrim*. In this case, the player has scripted entirely new encounters, quests, and puzzles for the player to traverse. This is the case with VzRedemption's Voyage to the Dreamborne Isles which allows the player to embark on entirely new quests (Figure 5.6).

Figure 5.6: Dreamborne Isles

This mod introduces twelve new islands that are interconnected through a loose dreamlike structure. The original story being told here raises some interesting questions about authorship. Calling this mod a transformative work seems like the best way to discuss it. However, as with the discussion of player stories in Chapter 2, the fact that the mod occurs within the realm of the game complicates things. The player can leave this quest at any moment and return to the main game. At the moment, I am comfortable saying that mods such as this are in the same category as other transformative works, but (as with many things in this project) the lines are somewhat blurry.

When considering the implications of modding in terms of the player story, it is clear that these fan-produced projects meaningfully change the game. The game genie discussed at the beginning of this chapter very likely falls in the same category, an early engine for modding the

system. The question still remains as to where the mods fit in terms of the glitch stories. Both are certainly a SWAP. However, the place where that shift occurs is worth mentioning. Well-designed mods are stable. They alter play in the manner that was intended by someone in just the same manner that standard gameplay does. They absolutely represent fan creativity, and they certainly open the possibility space for new stories. However, they do not do so in a manner that is emergent. While mods open up space for emergent narratives, they do so in very much the same way that the standard game does. This distinction still lies with the player, and it lies with him/her at the moment of play.

Conclusion

When players tell stories of glitches, they do so because something went wrong, but in the case of emergent narrative, they are simultaneously describing something going right. Everything lined up in this one moment. Yes, the system rules broke. Yes, an event occurred in the game that should not have occurred, but that is inconsequential. What matters is that when this breakdown occurred, everything lined up. Just as importantly, the player noticed. My purpose here has been to explain the lightning in a bottle of emergent narrative, and these glitch stories were immensely useful in helping me to do so. Even when we know the system has failed, players want the story to make sense. As long as the game is still playable, players find a way to contextualize the events which transpire on the screen. Thus, we tell stories. While certainly not the only way for emergent narratives to arise, the glitch represents tremendous potential. Because something has gone wrong, there is no way that the developers could have foreseen the glitch. Because glitches can often be difficult to replicate, the moment feels all the

more unique. Players are generally creative. They tell these stories as a way to let the reader into this moment which felt special. If a glitch is a breakdown in the rules, it is a wondrous one, for it lets the player see behind the artifice of the simulation. It forces the player to question his/her assumptions. That a player can take something broken and insist that it is wonderful is nothing short of why we tell stories in the first place.

This trend holds when players are interacting with any of the diverse kinds of SWAPs which I have here discussed. At a core level, these little changes to the way that the system functions serve an important purpose. Players are pushing the boundaries of what a game is. Much of the work in outlining the kinds of stories that players tell has been to make something explicit which we often lose in the shuffle. Games are for the player. The succeed because of the players. When we focus all of our attention on the system, the rules that allow games to happen, it is easy to forget that these wonderful systems are for us. This means that the urge to do more with them, be it mods, speed runs, or glitching, is important as it showcases our creativity. When players are telling their stories on the forums, they are doing the same thing. One of the lessons that this project continues to reinforce is that things are rarely rigid and inflexible. The games change to accommodate us as much as we do for having played them.

CHAPTER 6: A THEORY EMERGES

"We all make choices, but in the end, our choices make us." –Andrew Ryan

The question which comes most naturally from this investigation is why one ought study emergent narratives. However, perhaps the more fundamental question to begin with is why we study stories at all. The stories which we choose to tell (as opposed to the ones we leave by the wayside) reflect the lives that we live. The world is filled with dangers familiar and unknown. Thus, we create Achilles and Superman. Even if we, meager as we are, are unable to overcome the dangers of the world, these remarkable people that we create can handle the dangers of the world. We can understand the shape of the world's problems through the Übermensch we create. Achilles was arrogant so that we could better understand hubris. Superman is a paragon precisely because the world was so chaotic at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. Even as we recognize their power, nothing gold can stay, and we know that and show it in an unprotected heel as much as we do from an unstable green rock. My point is that at our most fantastic or pedestrian, when we tell stories, we tell something of ourselves. Since the very beginning, we have been fascinated with the fundamentals of what we can learn from the stories we tell. Aristotle's *Poetics* are just the first in a millennia long pursuit of the answer to a question that continues to elude us because the context continues to shift. To answer the question I posed above in a somewhat reductive way, we study stories because they are there, because they contain the very essence of us.

Thus, when I turn to the medium of the video game as a place where we tell stories, I turn to a mode of telling that opens the space to share stories in some important ways. Not since we

began writing in the marginalia of manuscripts has an innovation occurred which so perfectly invited people to be a part of the story. There have been some important strides in the study of narrative in video games, but those strides always seem to be facing the game itself. When I began my investigation of player stories, I did so because of how much the conversation surrounding digital games talks around the player. We talk a lot about interactivity as a concept. There is not a lot of space dedicated to showing what the player actually has to say about the narrative which they experienced in the moment. Enter emergent narrative. Players are absolutely telling their stories online, and what is wonderful about these stories is that they put the teller and listener so close to the event in question. Emergent narratives are in an interstitial space between fiction and nonfiction. The inciting incident is such an easy thing to identify. The player says, "this interesting event happened while I was playing," but the narrative does not stop there. Many times, players fill in the blanks and round out the story. This act of creating mini-protonarratives is raw and fascinating. Moreover, these little stories can help us to better understand the player and the form of storytelling. To put it simply, I am studying emergent narratives that players are sharing because no one else is, and I have learned quite a bit about how these stories come together. Before digging into the grand lessons of emergent narrative, it is useful to take a moment to reflect on the individual chapters from this work. The individual chapters in the body of this dissertation were the result of some sorting on my part. Each one addresses a different theme found in player stories. While the categories are somewhat artificial, it is useful to separate the stories by type in order to better understand how they function as a whole.

Playing the Player Character: Characterizing the Player's Play

I began this inquiry with the relationship between the player and the character. Central to this understanding were the concepts of avatar, identification, and presentation. The avatar is the instrument of the player's will in a particular game. Through this entity, players interact with the gameworld, and of equal importance, they tell stories through the eyes of the avatar. To be clear, an avatar need not be a stand-in for the player. These characters enact the will of the player, but players breath life into them, giving the in-gam-e person an identity that is often separate from the person at the controls. Because events in the game are happening to the avatar, the player experiences the phenomenon of identification through this lens. They feel for the plight of the dark elves who are confined to the grey quarter only if their character is in a position to do so. This narrowing of perspective and lensing through the individual player character is an important part of how the player encounters narrative in a game like *Skyrim*. It is important to establish how these relationships work because this sets the narrative focus. This focus invariably leads to the pay off in the form of presentation. When players take to the forums to create a profile for their character, they have the distance and hindsight to make connections between individual game events. It is here that the work of emergent narrative begins. Players simultaneously present their characters as cohesive narrative units and *re*-present the individual game events in context so that they form a single story. Thus, when players encounter conflicting narrative elements (being a hero in various holds and performing assassinations for the Dark Brotherhood), this moment of potential narrative dissidence dissolves in the telling. The player character uses the public identity as a cover for the private criminal persona. If the character profiles demonstrate one facet of emergent narrative particularly well, it is that when confronted with seemingly incongruent game elements, the player will use the narrative as a means to make

sense of these moments. This showcases an important function of the emergent narrative: to make sense of the world. Certainly, the events in a gameplay session can seem random, but the act of reflection allows the player to line up everything in a nice neat little row.

The Journey and Who Is Driving the Hero

If the second chapter dictates how the story is experienced, then the subsequent one outlines who is driving that action. Beginning with an explanation of the hero story as a concept, this chapter explores the various driving forces of narrative and works to create a framework in which emergent narrative sits. On the one side of emergent narrative are achievements. These system -generated goals allow players to extend the life of gameplay by introducing challenges which the player might otherwise not undertake. The rewards for these are extrinsic. Players receive badges to denote that they have completed these tasks, and those badges are outwardly facing, indicating to the community that the player has accomplished something. On the other side of emergent narrative are the transformative works created about *Skyrim*. In these stories, I noted that the space of fiction allows writers to explore aspects of the game world that are generally prohibited through play. Authors explored themes that cannot occur within the game such as pregnancy, and perspectives such as multiple narrators and second person. In the space between these lies emergent narrative in the form of the player story. There is more freedom in the scope of the player story then there is in achievements as players dictate the terms in which the narrative occurs. Certainly, the story of the great cabbage delivery lies outside of the scope of what the developers had planned upon creating the game. However, the player stories also differ from fan fiction in that they lie closer to the act of play. Player stories are

autobiographical and therefore dictate experiences form the game. The principle difference is that players are filling in the blanks for these stories, coloring in details and motivations where appropriate. The hallmark of these player stories, that which makes them emergent, is the connections that players make between in-game details. The significance of these stories lies in the act of telling. Players chose these moments as exemplars of what made a particular play session unique. They shared these stories because nothing inherent in the system was keeping track of the information. The act of telling is likely as important to the marker of emergent narrative as anything within the content of the narrative itself.

Telling of the End Times

When looking for narratives which have impact on the player, my inquiry naturally took me to stories of death. In the fourth chapter of this dissertation, I examined death and games' complicated relationship with it. This inquiry begins with outlining exactly what death is in games and what it is not. Because most games value the ability to carry on, death, as a mechanic, functions as an impermanent punishment for some action taken by the player. I did note examples when this line became blurrier with in-game memorials which were approached by players often with respect and deference but occasional with callousness. In these instances, players were responding to the death of a real person, thus situating the events which occurred closer to death itself. However, such moments are rarer and more difficult to square with death as a line of code that triggers a respawn or makes a number on the top of the screen become smaller. When attempting to understand what death means to players, how they tell stories about it, I drew attention to the manner of the characterization which players brought to the stories of

death. In stories of the PC dying a "good death," the player attempts to redress some wrong which is baked into the game's imposed narrative. In both of these instances, the player ultimately fails, but does so in a way that is worth telling. We can see players building narrative around deaths in the game with players finding mysteriously dead NPCs and attempting to Sherlock the answers. In other cases, players reminisce about the little humorous deaths which they encountered during play. In these moments, players use relief humor as a signal for empathy form their fellow players. In other cases, these stories of death served instructional ends, allowing players to learn from their mistakes. The player stories with the most emotion packed into them were often those which described the death of a follower which makes sense, as those moments are more permanent. The telling encapsulates the frustration at a real loss in terms of the game as opposed to a load screen. My own dead is dead playthroughs support my suspicion that the level of stakes involved in a death impact the narrative significance of the player stories which emerge from a loss. Because these deaths are unexpected, they serve as alluring starter material for emergent narrative.

What Happens When I Press This Button

The fifth chapter of this work examines situations which occur when the game is changed by circumstances for which the developers did not account. Using the umbrella term shift which alters play (SWAP), I explore how the narrative is created under such circumstances. Because this chapter focuses more on how the rule system interacts with the creation of player stories, I began with a discussion of those rules. The concept of cellular automata was especially helpful in framing individual aspects of a game's code functioning as one cohesive unit. Each piece has

a specific job to do, and the entire organism only functions as intended when all parts are doing so. I differentiate between glitches (aberrations of the system) and glitching (how player implement those ghosts in the machine). Using these keystones, I discuss the kinds of play stories that these events can create. Players explained that the dead rose, and others simply refused to die. The glitches at the core of these stories did not deter the players from interpreting the events through the eyes of their characters. In other stories, it is the player's imagination that makes the glitch meaningful. Whether it is a sea of clones washing over the world or a wall spider crunching around the player, the event itself is only the beginning. The player breathes life into these moments. The physics of *Skyrim* creates numerous moments from players who fall but never hit the ground to hunters carried off by gods unknown. Taken in comparison to the mods discussed in this chapter, the principle sticking point lies in who is the author. For the player, a mod introduces multiple authors, but it still situates the player as receiver of media whereas the player stories are moments of emergence because of their unplanned nature.

What Emergent Narrative Looks Like

One of the principle purposes of this dissertation has been to catalog the characteristics of emergent narrative as it occurs in real character stories. Of the four hundred player stories sampled, many of them are not emergent narratives. To make the claim that emergence lies simply in a player recounting events from a game somewhat misses the point of the phenomenon. To revisit the first chapter of this work, when I am talking about emergent narrative, I a describing a story told by a player about interacting with a game in which events occurred which are significant to the player but ignored by the system. The shape of these

stories is absolutely contingent upon the player. He/she reflects on the act of play and draws connections between in-game events in order to tell a story. I make the caveat that not all of the four hundred player stories sampled are emergent narratives in order to draw attention to the remarkable qualities of the emergent narratives which I did find. And I found quite a few. One aspect which is especially noteworthy is how often these emergent narratives are in direct reaction to the story the game is trying to tell. Players often draw attention to incongruities within the system. These subversive emergent narratives challenge the fundamental supremacy of the game story, supplanting it for a new one, one which is designed by the player and is essentially unique. In review of these stories, I here reflect on what I have learned about emergent narratives over the course of this project. I learned that emergent narratives are additive, in that the story builds as the player progresses, contextual, in that the PC's history unavoidably informs and colors new experiences of the player, and surprising, in that the player is stricken by the emergent event, feeling compelled to recount the tale.

Additive/ Contextual Emergence

When I describe emergent narrative as additive and contextual, to a degree, I am describing the seeds of narrative, the taproots which lie firmly in play. They are a thousand little moments that happen to a player when he/she enters a gameworld. Many of these are dead ends, like seeing a mime who does not do anything spectacular. There is potential, but it is often unfulfilled. Because a game such as *Skyrim* is open world, the player is free to explore, free to encounter the world in an infinite number of possible ways. It is likely that there is a vast network of untapped possible stories that a player comes across during play which simply never

go anywhere. However, we can never know when details will add up to something amazing. Herein lies the wonder. It is only when the player takes the time to make the connections, to narrow the possibility space, that an infinite network of unrelated events becomes a single story with a through-line of events. When discussing the additive and contextual moments which players encounter in the game, the moments have already been sorted. A player has already made sense of them. I bring this up in order to draw attention not only to the singularity of the choices made by individual players, but to underline how many possible stories never get told because those connections were never made.

Tabula Rasa Avatar:

When players created profiles for their characters, they often build a rich life for their characters that goes well beyond the screen. With character bios such as Raistlin who is explained to have begun his training at age six, travelling from kingdom to kingdom until he finally found his way to Skyrim and that beginning scene in the cart. The 'history' of a character really begins when they are given a blank slate. Choose the race, gender, and features. Give them a name. Certainly, the gameplay always begins in the same place (unless a mod is being used), but numerous players found the incongruity of a character simply appearing in this carriage, being told that they were caught at the border, to be unacceptable. Thus, players use revisionist history. If their character has a massive fortune in game, they must have come from a family of merchants. If the cart really is their first memory, there must be a mysterious past complete with soap opera level amnesia. The point is always that players use what their character becomes as a result of play as a springboard to crafting a character in print that feels round and real.

The Trudging Dead:

When players encounter a glitch, it sticks in their mind because we are getting a glimpse at the inner workings of the machine. When something goes wrong, we are reminded that the system is just that. When players tell of Skjor wandering the countryside, killing bandits, they recognize that something is amiss. However, the NPCs in-game identity colors what they see. Certainly, the humdrum story of some code getting wonky is accurate, but a ghost who has returned to dutifully continue his charge as a Companion is a much better story. The context of his life makes the telling stick. Players use the events of the game to contextualize what is happening when they encounter these glitches. The actual event of the system malfunction just becomes more narrative fuel. That story builds because of events in the past. In the case of a long dead character returning, the payoff is a long-time coming. When it is a spider who was killed a few minutes ago pouring half-way out of a wall to make the player's skin crawl, the effect is somewhat more immediate. In either case, the history matters.

Loss and Mourning:

When players lose their companions or spouses in game, these moments are necessarily tinged by the past. The player who tells of Janessa's death does not simply say that a thief killed her. This is certainly all that happened in the game. The only real information that the system tracks is that she is dead. However, such a moment does not really do justice to the adventures the two had together, the life that they shared. Thus, the player ties everything together, starts at the beginning, and from there the reader is invited to understand why this death is significant. In any game which uses killing people as a primary gameplay mechanism, the urge to contextualize

is understandable. One could easily ask why this life matters when the only memorial that bandits get is a number in a stat sheet increasing by one. Players answer that question by showing why this person was special, why they did not deserve to die. This has everything to do with our affinity towards storytelling. When I say that I've killed over a thousand people in my playthrough of Skyrim, it is just a number, all the more so because at the end of the day, I did not kill any real people. They are simulations. Perhaps much more importantly, they are not very effective simulations of real people. They are enemies with names like Bandit Chief and Forswarn. The only identity that these characters get is their alignment with an enemy faction. They are the bad guys. Thus, when a character with whom the player has history dies in the game, the moment matters because these NPCs are much closer to the real thing. They are more effective simulations. They have names and opinions. These characters react to what the player does based on a moral code. They have a story. And players share these stories as a way to say that because the narrative affected them, it has merit. They tell of these deaths as an invitation to the reader to understand why they felt a real emotion.

Love Life:

In stories of love, players cobble together details about their characters' relationships beyond the bare bones of marriage provided by the system. Certainly, the player may not know which NPC they meet in game will ultimately steal their character's hearts, but the retelling is always fate, if only in hindsight. The saw him/her across a crowded room and angels began to sing. Perhaps things were rocky at first, leading to tension, but as the adage goes, where there's smoke, there's fire. In my own play, I found that my character meeting Ysolda at the precise

moment that she did was fortuitous. The little details of encountering a character who showed kindness to a Khajiit when she had met little but xenophobia up to that point put a fine point on the narrative. Simply put, the 'love story' in *Skyrim* is pretty thin. At the system level, the player completes a task for any character who the game has flagged as eligible for a relationship. If the player has done this, learned about marriage practices from the temple, and donned the Amulet of Mara, then the NPC will agree to marry the player. As a gameplay mechanic, this is serviceable, but as a story, it is the equivalent of telling the grandkids that the happy couple met in line at a food truck. Players build in these additional details and make connections between events because we want an epic romance. We want matches made in heaven and star-crossed lovers overcoming their fate. A common theme here is that players build these stories because they are not getting them from the game. When we make connections between these events, string them together into something coherent, we are saying that more is happening than what the game is keeping track of.

Surprising Emergence:

The element of surprise is perhaps the most striking feature of the emergent narrative. Simply, players never know when a moment of play will subvert their expectations, something completely unexpected happening. This is directly tied to the illusion of coherence in digital games. Because games, especially complex ones, are keeping track of massive quantities of information and because developers put numerous systems in place to create this illusion, it is often easy for the player to feel like games are one cohesive entity when in fact they are a collection of different systems all governing some aspect of the play experience. From a

narrative standpoint, this means that the less tight the control is over the linearity of the story, the more opportunities exist for something unplanned to happen. While I maintain that surprise moments which lead to emergence are possible in most, if not all, video games, I will admit that an open story structure makes those moments happen considerably more often. *Skyrim* makes for a useful test case because of how much freedom the player is given in the way the story unfolds. It begins in the same place for everyone, and the story at hand has two real endpoints (the war and the showdown with Alduin). What happens in between is very much up to the player. Certainly, there are a finite number of quests, large though they are, but the permutations of order for completing them borders on infinity. This space, coupled with the numerous minor events which could happen during play, creates the possibility of emergent narrative. That surprise is a powerful force as I have found over the course of this project. The small sampling which I will review here represent only a handful of these surprising moments, but they are worth discussing because of what they demonstrate. They showcase the narrative potential wrapped up in these emergent moments. There are things in the game that no one can see coming, and because they are utterly unplanned, the telling represents a way to crystalize them, create a history which the game is not.

Unexpected Reactions:

In order to breathe life into the game, NPCs are responsive. They give the player feedback based on actions taken in the game, and this makes the world feel more real. It provides the player with a sense that actions they take in game matter. We only really feel that system when the reaction we receive is contextually inappropriate. When a player steals a single

alchemy ingredient from a kindly old woman and she hires a band of thugs to deal with him/her for this grievous offense, playing coy after the fact, we can see the seams of this system. This moment is surprising because the because of how ludicrous it really is. When the player has just assassinated a member of the royal family, creating bedlam in the wake of this event, and one of the guards winks at the player with a "Hail Sithis," deep down, we know that this is a response which randomly happens when the player has worked for the Dark Brotherhood. However, in that moment, everything falls into place. A story unfolds in which the guard is telling the player 'I know what you just did, and I'm fine with it.' These little details arise from different parts of the game acting exactly as they should, but when they come together in just the right way, they engender feelings of delight.

Moonwalking Army:

The moments of surprise are at their best when they come completely out of nowhere. When a group of soldiers transporting a prisoner to be killed turn into a flash mob, moonwalking their way across the countryside, there is no planning for that moment. All the more so when one of the ascends to heaven after giving a stern warning to the player. These little events are narratives in the same vein as Hemmingway's six-word stories. They rely heavily on subtext and often leave more questions than answers. The reason that stories such as these work is precisely because the game has such a strong imposed narrative against which to act. In practice, these soldiers periodically marching across the countryside, prisoner in tow, are meant to enrich the story of the war. If the player has made any progress on the Blades storyline, he/she has seen the

place where these prisoners are brought, the torture and eventual death which awaits them. For such a grim scene to become a music video caricature of itself, one has to laugh.

Murder Mystery:

As should be clear, a lot of NPCs die over the course of a single *Skyrim* playthrough, and the reason is almost always clear. Between wandering bears, undead, dragons, and good old murder, it is rarely difficult to ferret out the culprit when encountering a dead character. However, with a game as large as *Skyrim*, it has become clear that often is not the same as always. A dead guard in the middle of the road raises questions. It feels like it should be the beginning of a quest. The player searches the guard's body, and he/she is carrying a note. The player must complete the journey for this stalwart traveler. The only problem is that the game never planned this moment. Thus, the player gets all the good narrative elements of a quest without any of the payoff. We tell stories about these occurrences because we cannot abide a mystery. A character standing over another in the middle of a church with a knife on the ground sounds like the start of a noire novel. She insists that she got there just as the real killer skulked into the shadows, and it is up to the player to smoke out the culprit before the trial wraps up. The details are scintillating, and we therefore run with them. Interestingly, because there is no planned story here, because no one designed this moment, it is forever a loose end. It can be anything our imaginations allow. With surprising emergence, the player tells the story because it is not the game that everyone else played.

Best Laid Plans:

Perhaps the most apparent of these moments of surprise occur when the player finds him/herself at odds with the will of the system. It is all but certain that the first time a player visits Solitude an execution will occur. This is a moment in the imposed narrative that is meant to do work. It establishes for the player that the war has real consequences. Families are being torn apart and communities are in disarray. The philosophical argument about which ideology is correct is put up against the reality that people are dying. Because of how important this moment is, the designers took careful steps to ensure that it would happen. It may not be impossible to rescue that poor guard from the chopping block, but to even attempt it is a major disruption. The player took great pains to make things go smoothly. The ensuing massacre that occurred instead is surprising precisely because of the meticulous setup the player created. This is ultimately the hallmark of surprise in emergent narrative. When the player sets out to tell their own story, when they overtly reject the story that the game is trying to create, all bets are off.

What This Work Means

This is what emergent narrative looks like. We can use such a framework to better understand how to find the phenomenon. However, there is still the big looming question of what to do with that information. By studying emergent narrative, I confirmed something that I know from experience that never seems to get concretely discussed. There is a narrative that occurs only when we are not playing the game. Certainly, the act of play is narrative. People have talked about this. But that narrative usually takes one of two forms. There is the story that the game is telling and the blow by blow of what the player does. However, when the player has

a bit of time to reflect, they start to make connections. The beginning of emergent narrative is the surprise. Something happens in the game that reminds them that it is a game. The player's suspension of disbelief is just shaken enough that the immersion is broken. Players can either reject the narrative outright when this happens, or (more interestingly), they can reflect on the event and contextualize it.

If they take the latter route, suddenly all manner of things fall into place. I posit that the reason players do this is because they recognize that this surprise event is special. It is not what the developers intended; they are off the beaten path. When they make sense of the events in the game, they are becoming the coauthor. They are no longer receivers of media, they are cocreators. This is an extension of narrative transportation. If a good story can open up new worlds for a person, then telling a good story, adding and embellishing details that they lived, then we get a gateway into that person. We need to be studying this because interactive media has opened up the space for us to be the heroes in a tale of our own design. No one is telling players to do this. They are doing it because they recognize that something important has happened. They are sharing it to see if we agree. Not just with their story, but with their core values.

Moving forward from this project, I know that everything there is to be said about emergent narrative has not been said. This dissertation's primary focuses is on the phenomenon in one game. Given the qualitative nature of this research, it makes sense to limit my approach in order to arrive at meaningful conclusions from my data. By digging into player stories and exploring the boundaries of player created emergence, I have given a definition of emergent narrative which places the player at the center. Future discussions of emergent narrative can further the conversation, exploring player created emergence in different kinds of games. The

boundaries of emergent narrative in games which increasingly rely on procedural content generation as well as virtual reality demonstrate interesting possibilities for future discussions of this phenomenon. This is not to say that the work here has not meaningfully expanded the concept of emergent narrative. This work broadly extends how we understand the relationship between the player and narrative. These players are not passive recipients of content. They are storytellers. Ideally, this work will spark continued interest in the player as a creative individual who does things with games instead of having things done to them by the medium. If we make this subtle shift in the way that we treat and perceive the player, then untold new avenues open up for us to continue the exploration of narrative.

This work illuminates the need for an expanded understanding of how players interact with systems which tell stories, and just as importantly, it outlines what happens when players set out to tell their own. The logical continuation of this line of thinking is more research. *Skyrim* is, after all, only one game, and vast as the community is, it contains a finite number of players. The goal for future work, then, should be to test the bounds of storytelling that players undertake. I strongly suspect that this is a journey we will not ever finish, but the clearer the picture becomes, the more we will have to say about a mode of engagement that is fundamental to the human experience.

APPENDIX A: DISCUSSION THREADS SAMPLED

Forum	Thread	URL
Skyrim Forums	"Character Profiles"	http://skyrimforums.org/sf/threads/character-profiles.4020/
GameFAQ	"Funny Stories from Your Travels"	https://www.gamefaqs.com/boards/615803-the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim/60984267
IGN	"Let's Hear Some Cool Skyrim Stories"	http://www.ign.com/boards/threads/vesti-lets-hear-some-cool-skyrim-stories.206780416/
Steam	"Your Skyrim Stories	http://forums.steampowered.com/forums/showthread.php?t=2249722
Reddit	"Tell Me If Your Lesser Heroics"	https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/5nfygc/tell_me_if_your_lesser_heroics/
Skyrim Forums	"Skyrim Marriage Counseling"	http://skyrimforums.org/sf/threads/janus3003s-skyrim-marriage-counseling.17131/
Skyrim Forums	"Hardest Place to Find/Reach"	http://skyrimforums.org/sf/threads/hardest-place-to-find-reach.8320/
Reddit	"Reddit seems to Like These Skyrim Stories"	https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/n7gze/reddit_seems_to_like_these_skyrim_stories_so_here/
Reddit	Stories from Playing Evil	https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/2wh2lo/does_anyone_have_any_good_stories_from_playing_a/
Dark Creations	"Your Funny Skyrim Moments"	https://www.darkcreations.org/forums/topic/655-your-funny-skyrim-moments/
GameFAQ	"Your Single Most Awesome Moment"	https://www.gamefaqs.com/boards/615803-the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim/65114076
Skyrim Forums	"Unexpected Epic Moments	http://skyrimforums.org/sf/threads/unexpected-epic-moments.19120/
Elder Scrolls Wikia	"Best Skyrim Moments"	http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/Thread:792065
Reddit	"Best Skyrim Moments"	https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/3aat3s/skyrim_stories/

Elder Scrolls Wikia	“Sad Skyrim Stories”	http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/Thread:317771
GameFAQ	“Best Deaths”	https://www.gamefaqs.com/boards/615803-the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim/69558980
Reddit	“Stupidest Ways You’ve Died”	https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/1vj0cq/what_are_the_stupidest_ways_youve_died/
Bungie	“First Death”	https://www.bungie.net/en/Forums/Post/3371708?sort=1&page=1
Skyrim Forums	“Unexplained Deaths”	http://skyrimforums.org/sf/threads/unexplained-deaths.36592/
Skyrim Forums	“Unexpected NPC Deaths”	http://skyrimforums.org/sf/threads/unexpected-npc-deaths.13865/
Escapist	“Swap Glitch Stories”	http://www.escapistmagazine.com/forums/read/9.329794-Alright-lets-swap-Skyrim-glitch-stories
GameFAQ	“Post Your Funny Glitches	https://www.gamefaqs.com/boards/615804-the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim/65741847
Reddit	“Post Your Funny Stories and Glitches	https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/3aat3s/skyrim_stories/
Reddit	“Funniest of Scariest Glitch”	https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/1kyi76/what_is_the_funniest_or_scariest_glitch_you_have/
Neo Seeker	“Skyrim Scary Stories	http://www.neoseeker.com/forums/52479/t1752722-skyrim-scary-stories/
Giant Bomb	“Funniest Glitch You’ve Seen”	https://www.giantbomb.com/the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim/3030-33394/forums/whats-the-funniest-glitch-youve-seen-in-skyrim-526648/

APPENDIX B: STORIES SAMPLED FROM AOOO

Author	Title	URL
BrunetteAuthorette99	“The Bear and the Wolf	http://archiveofourown.org/works/2301317
Frostbite55	“Breeding Experiment”	http://archiveofourown.org/works/6767797
Krysis	“Breeding Knowledge”	http://archiveofourown.org/works/4078849
Fluttermoth	“Causa Mortis	http://archiveofourown.org/works/850578
Katiebour	“Chained”	http://archiveofourown.org/works/344404
Tranachvil	“Dangerous and Unbelievably Vain”	http://archiveofourown.org/works/510544
Sigrid_Storrada	“Demon Seed”	http://archiveofourown.org/works/6712183
Melfice	“Evidence”	http://archiveofourown.org/works/329027
OpalBee	“His Brother’s Keeper”	http://archiveofourown.org/works/1092901
NoxiousSancity	“Like Lightning”	http://archiveofourown.org/works/9128470
PinguinoSentado	“Nightfall”	http://archiveofourown.org/works/8749969
Pibroch (littleblackdog)	“On Southerly Winds”	http://archiveofourown.org/works/509081
Aelia_D	“Persuasion”	http://archiveofourown.org/works/650999
Missema	“Skyrim is for Lovers”	http://archiveofourown.org/works/475930
Orphan_account	“Slow Burn”	http://archiveofourown.org/works/888956
Gaqalesqua	“Succour”	http://archiveofourown.org/works/4970980
MissDelight	“Sweet Dreams and Dark Desires”	http://archiveofourown.org/works/2919758
Topside	“This Love Will Be My Downfall”	http://archiveofourown.org/works/855692
RainySpringMorning	“The Voice Within”	http://archiveofourown.org/works/3173978
VaultEscapeArtist	“You’re Going Places I Can’t Follow”	http://archiveofourown.org/works/1199574

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