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New Game Plus: A Study of Video Game Narratives

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New Game Plus: A Study of Video Game Narratives

By

Arash Hajbabaee

A Thesis

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New Game Plus: A Study of Video Game Narratives

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ABSTRACT

New Game Plus: A Study of Video Game Narratives is a scholarly thesis that examines three

dominant narrative forms in video games, namely, linear, branching, and rhizomatic. These

narrative forms help contextualize this study's consideration of the history of video games which

reveals the increasing sophistication of the medium as a form of storytelling. This thesis

examines two different video games in each of the three categories and traces how more recent

video games tend to use player interactivity to explore and reflect players' morality. Common

threads in the examined video games include moral dilemmas, socio-political issues,

remediations of earlier narrative forms, game mechanics, and the effects of player agency on

video game narratives.

DEDICATION

For Sahar

Sorry for talking about games all the time!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

This scholarly thesis project focuses on narrative forms evident in contemporary video games. Before discussing the video game narratives studied in this project, I will briefly explore the significance of the act of play in human society and as a fundamental component of any narrative form. In his study *Homo Ludens* (1938), Johan Huizinga comments on the socio-cultural significance of games. Key topics covered in *Homo Ludens* include the significance of the act of play in relation to war, law, learning, education, civilizing functions, and in particular, language. In his book, Huizinga comments on gaming and playing by stating that, "even in its simplest forms on the animal level, play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It goes beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity" (1). According to Huizinga, the manner in which games go "beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity" is by engaging audiences' or players' minds with the socio-politically charged *subject matter* of the games. This is Huizinga's point when he further explains, "In play there is something 'at play' which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something" (1). This thesis will discuss the various meanings that the act of play may reveal through narratives that emerge in contemporary video games.

Video games are not the first medium to combine play and narrative. Many storytelling forms are based on game-like "exchanges." Parlour games such as I-spy, charades, twenty questions, or even dinner theatre productions involve audience participation in game-based forms of storytelling. One can consider how early literary works such as Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353) and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (c. late 1300's) depict storytelling as a kind of game where travellers exchange tales to amuse each other. Jokes are another form of game-like literary

or cultural exchange. In the 20th Century, Surrealist games such as "the exquisite corpse" engage players as they collaboratively create a text by passing around a sheet of paper and adding random new lines to that sheet without reading any of the previous lines. Such literary games have no win or lose conditions. However, in some literary games there may be an implied reward for success. Riddles are among such games, both in their folklore form and within literature. For example, the old folk riddle "As I was Going to St. Ives" tells a story to the listener but also invites a response;

> As I was going to St. Ives,
>
> I met a man with seven wives,
>
> Each wife had seven sacks,
>
> Each sack had seven cats,
>
> Each cat had seven kits:
>
> Kits, cats, sacks, and wives,
>
> How many were there going to St. Ives?

Based on the listener's perspective, the answer to this riddle might be either *one* (i.e.; only the speaker), or *all* of them because the traveller may have encountered the group while both the traveller and the group were on route to St. Ives together. Even a simple riddle such as this carries larger socio-political implications. Studying the evolution of this riddle through centuries may raise questions or provide answers on matters such as polygamy in different time periods and locations (e.g.; a man with seven wives). An example of a riddle within a literary work can be seen in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* where one gravedigger poses a riddle to another character, "What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?" (Act 5, Scene 1, ll. 42-3) The answer refers to a "grave-maker" (l. 60). This short riddle tells a very brief

story that considers the social role of death and causes audiences to consider the ephemerality of materialism in contrast to human mortality. It also still functions as a game that invites audience participation and promises as a reward, either a thought-inspiring engagement or the excitement of answering correctly. ##(cannot read comment)

As part of an oral storytelling tradition, riddles are founded upon an implied "contract" or tacit agreement between the riddler and the audience. The riddler's question implies that there will be some form of reward if one listens and participates. In this sense, the tradition of *all* storytelling, whether oral, written, digital, or otherwise is based upon similar game-like contracts whereby the tale of the storyteller promises a reward to the listener and asks for an engagement in return. Game-like properties of most narrative forms extend beyond rewarding the audience since they also include rules. The audience agrees to listen, read, or participate, and to accept the premises of the story, even if they many seem outlandish. Conversely, the storyteller promises to deliver an engrossing narrative that engages the audience with the promise of some kind of reward. Hence, any narrative can inherently be understood as a quasi-game, particularly if one adopts Huizinga's perspective towards the all-encompassing nature of play.

With the understanding that the act of play has always been a part of narrative expression, I will now move on to the discussion of video games. First, I will provide a brief definition of the term "video game" and specify what this term refers to. Next, I will discuss the fundamentally ergodic or participatory aspect of video games. Then, I will comment on how video games' "remediate [G]" or adapt narratives from earlier literary works, including books, films, folk tales, plays, etc. I will also introduce the video game narrative types (linear, branching, rhizomatic), while cross-referencing to the major narrative forms (comedy, romance, tragedy, irony/satire).

And, I will offer perspectives on how video games reflect socio-political and economic concerns of their times.

To define the term "video game" it helps to consider the history of the medium. Most attempts at providing a history of video games begin with naming the first video game ever designed. Such a definition is bound to venture into wide-ranging technical territories. However, different sources have arrived at different viewpoints over the years. For example, *History,* a website that covers a wide range of cultural topics, cites *OXO* (1952) as the first ever video game in their article titled "Video Game History" (n.p.). By contrast, *Infoplease,* an online encyclopedia, identifies *Tennis for Two* (1958) as the first video game in the article, "Timeline: Video Game, Part I" (n.p.). The two websites disagree since their definitions of the term "video game" apparently differ, although neither site provides a clear definition. In fact, most sources which provide a history of this medium do not provide a specific definition for the term "video game."

The term "video game" was applied, among others, by critics Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron in their article, "An Introduction to the Video Game Theory" (n.p.). However, it is noteworthy that Wolf and Perron discuss only their use of the term "video game" as applied to electronic forums in which players control images on a video screen. But again, they do not offer a *clear* definition of the term. For purposes of this study, I will adopt the definition offered by Nicolas Esposito in his essay, "A Short and Simple Definition of What a Videogame Is." Esposito offers an effective definition as follows; "A videogame is a *game* which we *play* thanks to an *audiovisual apparatus* and which can be based on a *story*" (n.p). Esposito is careful to point out that *some* early video games do not have a storyline or plot (e.g.; *Tetris*). However, his inclusion of story as a fundamental, albeit optional aspect of the definition of the term stresses

the importance of narrative in video games. This thesis examines video game narratives as part of an emerging literary art form arising within the new digital literary frontier, while moving away from earlier forms including oral expression, print, radio, cinema, television, and video.

The most significant quality that sets video games apart from other mediums, their ergodic nature, is explored in great detail by theorist Espen Aarseth, in his book *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997). In this book, Aarseth offers numerous insights on the game aspect of literary forms including video games. Aarseth's main point involves the *participatory* nature of many forms of writing. He begins by defining "cybertexts" which are texts that may or may not include a digital aspect; "The concept of cybertext focuses on the mechanical organization of the text, by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange. However, it also centers attention on the consumer, or user, of the text, as a more integrated figure than even reader-response theorists would claim" (1).

Examples of cybertext in print form could include Raymond Queneau's *One Hundred Million Million Poems,* (original French title: *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*) which engages readers directly in assembling each poem in the book. Queneau's book of poetry includes ten sonnets featuring the same rhyme and rhythm. Each line of each poem is printed on a separate strip of paper and can be interchanged with the correlating line from any other sonnet. Consequently, any lines from any of the ten sonnets can be combined with any line from all ten sonnets, resulting in 100,000,000,000,000 (one hundred thousand billion) different possible poems. The following image illustrates Queneau's printed book.

Image of Queneau's *One Hundred Million Million Poems,* "Breathtaking lines"

Aarseth goes on to define the participatory aspect of ergodic texts by commenting on the way they engage readers;

> In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. If ergodic literature is to make sense as a concept, there must also be nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages. (1-2)

In other words, while all texts involve *some* degree of audience participation, ergodic texts require higher levels of engagement that go beyond what Aarseth calls the "trivial" or non-extranoematic functions such as the simple action of turning a page. All video games fall under the ergodic category since they all require an extranoematic involvement. In other words, in order for any video game narrative to be initiated, a player must engage with the video game in a meaningful way. Aarseth also comments on the emergence of new digital technologies and says that they have re-shaped forms of communication and, by extension, one could argue that they have redefined forms of storytelling. He explains; "The emerging new media technologies are not important in themselves, nor as alternatives to older media, but should be studied for what

they can tell us about the principles and evolution of human communication" (17). This thesis posits that video game narratives have grown increasingly complex. However, one might take mild exception to Aarseth's point concerning new media technologies as "alternatives" to older modes of storytelling. Instead of viewing video games as literary *alternatives*, this thesis argues that earlier literary forms have been *extended* by emerging video game technologies.

The examination of the evolution of video games in this thesis demonstrates that in the past decade video game developers have focused on the ergodic nature of the medium in order to create either new narratives or retell older narratives in new and ergodic ways. Player interactivity is one of the defining features of this medium. Thus, the possible levels of audience engagement for video games far exceed those of other media. As such, it befits critics to acknowledge video games as a new medium of storytelling whose narratological possibilities have not yet been fully explored.

Although their ergodic nature sets them apart from other mediums, video games are still an extension of our literary modes of expression. Initially, our literary culture circulated predominantly in an oral form. Early epics such as *The Iliad, The Odyssey,* or *The Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam as well as jokes, riddles, folk tales, fairy tales, and myths were primarily recounted orally. With the advent of Gutenberg's printing press (1440), widespread literary expression began a shift from aural to visual forms. With the development of radio, cinema, television, and the internet, ways of telling stories shifted even further.

Given the proximity of video games to cinema, it is worth briefly commenting on the emergence of storytelling through moving pictures by noting that cinematic expression started by imitating theatre. For example, early films "framed" scenes within a proscenium arch. Dave Thier, a specialist in video games and technology as well as a senior contributor to *Forbes*

magazine, comments on such remediated techniques in his article, "Shooting the Proscenium Arch: How People Fail to Realize Technology's Potential" where he states that, "When film cameras first arrived, people weren't sure what to do with them. It was obvious that these devices could be used for entertainment, but early directors didn't have any precedent to work off of. The best thing they could think of was to film plays" (n.p.). Eventually, film directors discovered the subtleties of the cinematic medium and learned how to deploy its unique properties to tell stories by using dialogues, pan-shots, close ups, moving shots, montages, jump-cuts, etc. Cinema emerged as an *extension* of theatre and evolved unique ways of telling stories by realizing its own fundamental qualities as a medium. Contemporary video games are on a similar journey towards recognizing their own fundamental qualities as a storytelling medium. Just as cinema began its early forays into storytelling by remediating conventions of theatre while slowly discovering its own limits and freedoms, so video games can be recognized as an emerging literary form in its infancy.

Towards the end of the 20th century and the first part of the 21st century, video games were added to the many forms of storytelling media. This study argues that video games continue and extend literary traditions in their respective genres but mark a significant shift because they require direct audience participation. Nonetheless, like earlier forms of storytelling, video games reflect and respond to preceding narratives, works of art, and the socio-politics of their environments. This study also addresses how previous literary expressions resurface in contemporary video game narratives.

In their study, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000), Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin write extensively about how older narratives have been reintroduced into contemporary video game designs. They explain how video games adapt earlier narrative models

by arguing, "Graphic, role-playing computer games derive their narrative structure from earlier textual games *(Zork* and similar adventure games), which themselves come from fantasy literature, such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*" (94). Bolter and Grusin explain that the highly descriptive and almost photo-realistic detail of earlier texts such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy offer qualities "that many computer game designers have consciously or unconsciously imitated" (94). Arguably, all media tend to remediate aspects of previous media.

Among other subjects in this thesis, I will comment on the degrees of remediation evident in contemporary video games. The emergence of ergodic literature is a topic explored by numerous critics and theorists, including Janet Murray. In her 1998 book *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace,* she examines the implications of highly interactive narrative technologies suggested by the science fiction television series, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-94)*.* Murray anticipates the ergodic re-emergence of classic works of literature through technologies that would allow audiences to *live* their selected stories and have the narrative take shape according to *their decisions*. She calls such predicted advancements "a utopian technology applied to the age-old art of storytelling" (15). While we do not yet have "holodecks" akin to those introduced in *Star Trek,* video games come close to allowing audiences to "live" selected stories, where narratives are shaped by their decisions.

Other specialists expand on the topic of audience participation or what Aarseth calls the ergodic aspects of digital narratives which are related to video game narratives. In her 2018 book, *The Republic of Games: Textual Culture Between Old Books and New Media,* Elyse Graham examines the consequences of introducing game mechanics to digital platforms for the production and circulation of texts on the internet. She names this practice "gamification" and argues that most online spaces, notably "social media platforms, fan forums, and other user-

generated content platforms" including fanfiction websites are gamified and rely on audience participation to generate subject matter (3).

Graham pursues Huizinga's perspective games and narratives when she states, "The question of whether games are art has been almost exhausted in new media studies. The question of whether art is a game is less often asked and more difficult to answer" (3). Whether or not *all* art is a game remains a question for others to consider. This thesis assumes that the artful delivery of narrative forms in video games is indeed an emerging art form.

There are far too many aspects of video games one could analyze and far too many critics commenting on such aspects for this thesis to acknowledge fully. Stephen Kline*,* Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter examine one of these aspects, namely the business and economic portions of the video game industry, in their book titled, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (2003). In this book, the authors offer a critical analysis of business aspects of the video game industry and discuss global economic factors that shape it. Similarly, in *Games of Empire* (2009) Witheford and de Peuter address how video games can be understood as responses to global capitalism, militarism, and social control. To a degree socio-politics, militarism, and economics *might* shape game designs. While such studies are engaging and useful, this thesis focuses on how the storytelling aspects of video games *depict* such social phenomena but does not pursue how such phenomena affect actual game design.

There are other critics whose studies of video games come close to the approach of this thesis, yet they take somewhat different directions. For example, Ian Bogost, a well-known theorist within the academic field of video game studies, examines the culture of video game criticism in *How to Talk about Video Games* (2010). He observes that if we take the analysis of video games too seriously, then we risk Balkanizing game writing from the rest of culture. In

order to avoid such Balkanizing, this thesis offers close readings of video game narratives that include how their narratives have been remediated from other literary forms. As a result, this thesis situates video games as one of many modes of storytelling and, in doing so connects video games with other forms of storytelling thereby avoiding Bogost's concern over Balkanization.

In an earlier book, *Unit Operations* (2008), Bogost proposes a literary-technical theory that can be used to analyze video games. The key principles related to his view advance the idea that the most beneficial approach to video game criticism combines literary theory and technological analysis. Bogost believes that this approach can help humanists consider the merits of technology in their cultural studies and can help technologists understand the importance of video games as cultural creations. This thesis uses literary theory to analyze video game narratives as cultural artifacts, much in the spirit of Bogost's *Unit Operations,* but with a primary focus on the ludic qualities of video games, as well as their narrative forms.

Emerging video game narratives fall into three major categories. These include linear, branching, and rhizomatic forms. The linear narrative structure includes video games in which players have little or no way to alter the narrative pattern of the story. Linear games typically provide a single narrative direction. For example, *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) is a linear game which features a simple quest that cannot be altered by players. Conversely, games with branching narrative structures require players to choose between multiple pre-scripted options that can alter the overall narrative pattern. For example, the narrative outcome in branching games such as *Mass Effect* are determined via player choices. Lastly, rhizomatic games provide only the barest foundation for a narrative that must be shaped entirely by player choices. Rhizomatic games relinquish the game developers' position as "author" so that players can

create their own narratives using only game mechanics. *The Sims* series is a well-known example of rhizomatic games.

A rhizome has no definitive origin, order, or ending. Rhizomatically structured games have no fixed linear or branching structure to their narratives. Instead, they provide game mechanics that allow players to construct their own narratives. To use an analogue, one could play with building blocks in any way one wishes, but the blocks themselves do not steer their players to any direction. Video games such as *The Sims* (2000), or *Minecraft* (2009) fit this model. In their book, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* critics Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari comment on the nature of a rhizomatic structure; "It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overspills" (21). Rhizomatic video games have no fixed point of origin or destination for their narratives. Instead, an emerging storyline is created by players as they engage with the game mechanics. The below image of brain neurons illustrates a rhizome, a pattern with no point of origin that expands in countless unpredictable directions.
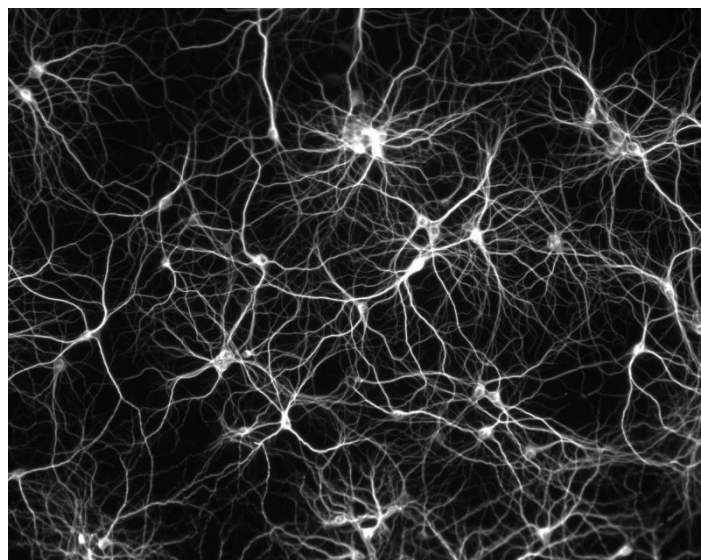
Hippocampal neurons. Paul de Koninck, Universite Laval.

Each chapter of this thesis begins with a brief look at the evolution of a video game narrative form (linear, branching, or rhizomatic). In addition, each chapter offers an analysis of two separate video games from the linear, branching, or rhizomatic narrative categories. One of the key questions that this thesis answers is, do players manipulate video games to their liking or do video games manipulate their players in order to tell pre-scripted stories? One might conclude that linear and branching video games manipulate their players because such games have pre-scripted and finite possible outcomes. On the other hand, rhizomatic video games provide infinite possibilities for players, so one might conclude that such games freely allow players to manipulate rhizomatic video games to their liking. However, closer examination reveals how all video games provide players with a sense of freedom while limiting choices to greater or lesser degrees. The apparent freedom of choice in video games can reveal any player's ethics or morality.

The main video game types including linear, branching, rhizomatic, can be cross-referenced to the major narrative forms including comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony/satire. For example, earlier linear games lean towards romance patterns, and depending on how they are played can bring comic *or* tragic outcomes. As a result of progressions and growing sophistication among game designers, branching video games tend towards irony and satire. Rhizomatic games elude the main literary forms and remain at the disposition of players choices.

Contemporary video games align with Marshall McLuhan's view of games in general. In his 1964 book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man,* McLuhan comments on the expressive and personal nature of games, "Like our vernacular tongues, all games are media of interpersonal communication, and they could have neither existence nor meaning except as extensions of our immediate inner lives" (256). By incorporating game mechanics that allow

players to affect aspects of narratives, video games succeed as "extensions of our immediate inner lives."

Video games can depict the socio-political and economic aspects of their environments, an aspect addressed by McLuhan in *Understanding Media;*

> Games are popular art, collective, social reactions to the main drive or action of any culture. Games, like institutions, are extensions of social man and of the body politic, as technologies are extensions of the animal organism. Both games and technologies are counter-irritants or ways of adjusting to the stress of the specialized actions that occur in any social group. As extensions of the popular response to the workaday stress, games become faithful models of a culture. They incorporate both the action and the reaction of whole populations in a single dynamic image. (254)

According to McLuhan, all games function as socio-cultural and political mirrors. Many contemporary video games function according to McLuhan's observation and use their interactive mechanics to tackle issues such as gender inequality, racial discrimination, corporate greed, and social corruption.

By examining how video games depict social issues is a key to understanding this evolving medium since, according to McLuhan, the fundamental qualities of any game include extending players' "immediate inner lives" while incorporating "both the action and the reaction" of represented societies. Because video games often remediate earlier works of art and literature, they bring audiences out of their traditionally passive roles thanks to their ergodic features. Players become *participants* in games' worlds and may occasionally make decisions that affect the societal values within those games. As such, while playing many contemporary video games, players may reveal their own ethics and morality.

One of the most important threads pursued in this thesis is how video games explore themes of morality. This study argues that recent video games have begun to use their ergodic features to reflect players' moral attitudes by allowing them to make ethically challenging or questionable decisions. In his article titled "Free Will and Moral Responsibility in Video Games," Christopher Bartel states that "videogames represent deterministic worlds in which players lack the ability to freely choose what they do, and yet players can be held morally responsible for some of their actions, specifically those actions that the player wants to do" (285). I agree with Bartel's statement since even the most open-ended video games pose finite and predetermined limits in the form of mechanical restrictions for players, and so "players lack the ability to freely choose what they do" even though video games provide a *sense* of a wide range of free choices. The number of choices in any video is limited by the game design.

Players might be held responsible for moral decisions during a game, but this thesis will later demonstrate that some video games pressure players into making immoral choices. The question of player morality takes us to complex and often unanswerable questions. For example, when faced with difficult moral choices, players can simply quit playing any video game whenever they wish. In his article, Bartel uses the idea of freedom of choice in reference to philosopher Harry Frankfurt. Bartel states that, "Frankfurt's point is that the freedom to choose what we want is sufficient to secure our moral responsibility even if we do not have the freedom to choose how we act. Indeed, when we act with a free will in Frankfurt's sense, we are doing exactly what we would do even if our actions were not predetermined" (288-9). In other words, even though video games feature "deterministic worlds," one's actions within these worlds are still carried out with some free will. As such, players remain responsible for the morally charged choices they make while playing video games.

Apart from Bartel's interpretation of Frankfurt, other studies open the way for the moral evaluation of player choices in video games as well. In a 2012 scientific article titled "Gut or Game? The Influence of Moral Institutions on Decisions in Video Games," authors Sven Joeckel, Nicholas Bowman, and Leyla Dogruel presented their findings from a series of studies they conducted on volunteers. In this article, they conclude that video game players "do not seem to morally disengage when faced with moral conflicts in virtual environments such as video games but, rather, they may rely on their moral intuitions—their gut instinct—and act accordingly" (481). The conclusion of this study is significant because it solidifies the idea that players morally engage with video games provided that the game presents such conflicts. Thus, not only is the examination of player morality in video games philosophically useful, as demonstrated by Bartel, but it is also a pragmatic endeavor as supported by Joeckel, Bowman, and Dogruel's scientific study.

In this thesis, the first chapter deals with linear video game narratives. The first game studied in that chapter is *BioShock Infinite* (2013). That game satirizes racial discrimination and violence by depicting a hypothetical subset of an American society which operates on hatred. Topics covered in the discussion of this game include violence against Indigenous people, social implications of "manifest destiny," and the provisionality of "truth" as constructed by institutions of power especially in the U.S.A. The second game studied in the first chapter is *Darkest Dungeon* (2016). Significantly, *Darkest Dungeon* features a design paradox that pressures players into making immoral and cruel decisions. Although the game's quest always ends with the protagonist replacing the "otherworldly" beings as the new evil, the player can choose between showing empathy towards other characters and prioritizing the completion of the game while remaining apathetic towards other characters.

Chapter two of this thesis covers branching narrative games and begins with an analysis of *Fallout 4* (2015). *Fallout 4* satirizes racial discrimination, violence, and social corruption. The core tension of this game centers around a marginalized and enslaved group of newly sentient synthetic humans or androids who seek freedom. The branching structure of *Fallout 4* provides several ways for players to side with oppressors or to join agents of desirable change in a post-apocalyptic society. The second game studied in chapter two is *The Stanley Parable* (2013). This game features an absurdist narrative that satirizes corporate hierarchies. During a quest resembling plays such as Sartre's *No Exit* (1944), the game parodies the usual precepts of video games themselves and questions player freedom of choice, while engaging in self-reflexive parody.

The third chapter of the thesis discusses rhizomatic narrative games and begins with a discussion of *Crusader Kings II* (2012). This game does not feature a plot in the traditional literary sense. Instead, it includes numerous game mechanics that allow players to control a nation between 769 and 1337 CE and to create their own stories. *Crusader Kings II* includes a design paradox similar to that of *Darkest Dungeon* by forcing players to make immoral decisions due to the difficulties of governing a nation. By including this paradox, *Crusader Kings II* explores the morally revealing aspects of power as players may *attempt* to change history and make ethical choices, or they may forgo ethics and commit horrific acts of violence and discrimination against marginalized minority groups. Depending on their choices, players may commit acts of religious discrimination while practicing Orientalist or colonialist tendencies. The second game studied in the third chapter is *Her Story* (2015). This game features an open-ended plot revolving around a murder mystery delivered through seven scripted police interviews involving a suspect. However, the interviews are cut into hundreds of pieces which players can

reassemble. Since players develop and determine the story for themselves, their choices may reflect their ethics and ideologies. *Her Story'*s reimagination and reconstruction of the detective genre allow the game to possibly reflect patterns of heteronormativity and misogyny in how players "solve" the mystery and construct the narrative. Alternately, players may reveal very socially liberal attitudes in their approach to this game.

The six main games studied in the following chapters are chosen to serve two purposes: First, these games reveal how contemporary video games use game mechanics within their respective formats (linear, branching, rhizomatic) to elevate player engagement in the process of storytelling. The second purpose involves questions of morality that are intrinsic to all six games analyzed in this thesis.

Regarding player engagement, the first game in each chapter exemplifies the majority of other games within the corresponding format (linear, branching, rhizomatic). The second game analyzed in each chapter discusses innovations to the chapter's format. For example, in Chapter I, *BioShock Infinite* is studied as an example of a typical linear video game that provides an engaging and complex plotline to players. However, *Darkest Dungeon,* the second game analyzed in Chapter I, extends standard linear structure by using innovative mechanics thereby allowing players to engage with the game on a deeper level (e.g.; by creating a secondary narrative alongside the main quest).

In Chapter II, *Fallout 4* demonstrates a conventional branching structure and provides multiple possible ways for players to engage with and alter the state of its narrative. Also, in Chapter II, *The Stanley Parable* goes further by utilizing a branching structure to parody the conventional tropes while more deeply engaging players.

Chapter III begins with an analysis of *Crusader Kings II* in which players' interactions are typical of the free-play aspects of most rhizomatic games. On the other hand, *Her Story,* unlike most rhizomatic games, provides a tentative plot but delivers it in a manner that leaves player engagement unspecified.

The second purpose of this thesis involves examination of the six games' moral aspects. This study demonstrates how contemporary video games often use their game mechanics to include themes of morality in their narratives. *BioShock Infinite* explores the protagonist's morally questionable past through a linear plot which players cannot alter. *Darkest Dungeon* explores a similar moral predicament not through its linear plotline, but through a game mechanic that poses moral challenges to players. *Fallout 4* offers an ethical predicament as the core tension of its narrative and requires players to make morally questionable decisions to complete the main quest. *The Stanley Parable* uses its branching structure to satirize other branching video games while engaging in self-parody. *Crusader Kings II* uses its game mechanics to put players into moral predicaments that affect the outcome of the game. Alternately, one's interpretation of evidence offered in *Her Story's* murder mystery reveals that player's morality. So, the six games analyzed in the following three chapters have been chosen to reveal degrees of player engagement as well as those games' moral implications.

As this study proceeds, it reveals how the three video game narrative formats (linear, branching, rhizomatic) shift from romance patterns, to ironic and satiric forms. Each of the three chapters also includes a brief introductory history of their respective format, before moving on to more detailed the analyses of the chapter's games. While some readers may be familiar with some of the many technical terms used in this thesis, others may not. Therefore, most technical terms will be marked with a superscript "G" (e.g.; "gameplay [G]"). If a reader is not familiar with

one of those terms, then a detailed definition will be found in the glossary in the appendices at

the end of this study.

CHAPTER I: LINEAR

Before beginning the analyses of *BioShock Infinite* and *Darkest Dungeon,* this chapter

briefly examines the history of video games that feature linear narratives and demonstrates how

such video games slowly shifted from romance narrative patterns to ironic and even satiric

forms. Linear narratives generally feature one scripted beginning, one scripted ending, and only

one path to move from the beginning to the end. Early linear games typically involve simple

quest patterns that are akin to romance structures as defined by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of*

Criticism: Four Essays (1957).

Frye explains, "The essential element of plot in romance is adventure, which means that

romance is naturally a sequential and processional form, hence we know it better from fiction

than from drama" (186). Video games dramatize adventure stories in a participatory (ergodic)

manner. Most early video games featuring a linear narrative involve a "hero" (the avatar),

embarking on an adventure to achieve some worthy goal. Frye expands on romance patterns as

follows, "The complete form of the romance is clearly the successful quest, and such a

completed form has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary

minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his

foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero" (187). Many early video games with linear

narratives feature this romance pattern.

Linear video games emerged early and were prominent during the beginning decades of

the medium. Some of the earliest examples of such narratives were found in games such as

Mouse in the Maze (1959), *Pac-Man* (1980), *Donkey Kong* (1981), *Castle Wolfenstein* (1981),

Dragon's Lair (1983), *Super Mario Bros. (1985*), and *The Legend of Zelda* (1986). *Mouse in the*

Maze is a simple video game in which players take control of a dot and navigate their way out of

a maze. Video game narratives have been a part of the video game industry in simple formats since the 1950s when computer programmers started using computer technology to create recreational games. Many of the above examples are frequently mentioned among the best early video games by game-related websites such as *GamesRadar* ("The 50 Best Games of the 80's" n.p.).

     Donkey Kong involves a quest by a character, later named "Mario," who seeks to rescue his "girlfriend" (Pauline) from a villain. The storyline unfolds as the avatar (Mario) begins his "perilous journey" to rescue the damsel in distress. Mario's journey involves striving to overcome the obstacles thrown in his path by "Kong," a villainous and powerful gorilla who serves as antagonist in the "crucial struggle" phase. The game's narrative concludes with the hero's "exaltation" when Mario rescues Pauline from Kong and the two are reunited. Thus, the simple narratives of video games such as *Donkey Kong* parallel conventions of romance quests. This quest pattern is evident in the majority of video games that feature linear narrative patterns.

     Apart from their narrative patterns, linear video games soon began focusing on three main areas of development. These include; 1) "level ^{G}" design aimed at player enjoyment and engagement, 2) improving visual effects, and 3) innovative game features enhancing players' interactions with games. Some video games focused on providing seamless and engaging progression through levels, others on presenting increasingly realistic and/or eye-catching visuals, while still others prioritized new ways for players to engage with games.

     Level design played an important role in video games like *Donkey Kong* and *Super Mario Bros.* by providing engaging experiences for players. According to video game analyst and critic Mark Brown's essay titled "Nintendo – Putting Play First | Game Maker's Toolkit," Nintendo, the publisher of both *Donkey Kong* and *Super Mario Bros.*, "always starts with the same goal:

coming up with a new way to play" (n.p.). Prioritizing level design expanded the possibilities of the romance quest pattern within these early game narratives by enhancing player engagement.

Enhanced visual effects were used in some games like *Dragon's Lair* to capture players' attention by providing the best optical experience for them. These games were essentially interactive animations in which players had to send the right command to keep the narrative moving forward by pushing the correct button at the right time. Player engagement in games such as *Dragon's Lair* was also accentuated by improved visual effects.

Increasingly interactive features became a priority in later linear game narratives. For example, according to Mark Brown in another essay titled, "The Year Stealth Games Got Serious | Game Maker's Toolkit," *Castle Wolfenstein* is one of the earliest, "games that incorporated hide-and-seek gameplay" by having the player put on "disguises to … pass SS Stormtroopers" (n.p.). Because of this "gameplay" innovation, *Castle Wolfenstein* is now considered an ancestor to the "stealth [G]" genre of video games. More importantly, such interactive features further enhanced players' engagement with the game as their avatars pursued romance quests.

While during the 1980s, video games continued to improve level design, visual effects, and interactivity to tell increasingly complicated stories within their linear narratives, some popular games featured no obvious narrative at all. In 2017, *Polygon,* a popular video game news and criticism website, identified the top three games of the 1980s. *Polygon* ranked *Tetris* (1984) as first, *Super Mario Bros. 3* (1988) as second, and *The Legend of Zelda* as third. The latter is still considered by many as one of the best "action-adventure [G]" games made. I will briefly digress here to note that *some* early video game designs and mechanics were so simple that they stood outside of what might be termed "literary" expression. *Tetris,* dubbed the best game of the 1980s, signifies the importance of such games in the history of video games.

Similar video games like *OXO (1952)* and *Tennis for two (1958)* do not have obvious plots and simply present players with a simple set of rules and mechanics. Players engage with the rules and challenges of these games in an attempt to win at either Tic-Tac-Toe, or a rudimentary digital tennis match. Players will come out either successful or unsuccessful and must repeat the same experience if they wish to continue playing the game. *Tetris* simply relies on player reactions in arranging geometric pieces in a horizontal line without leaving gaps. Games such as *Spacewar!* (1962), *Pong* (1972), *Space Invaders* (1978), *Pac-Man* (1980), *Galaga* (1981), and *Centipede* (1981) are all iconic video games that challenge players in different mechanical ways but include only the most rudimentary plotlines and prioritize only win or lose outcomes.

Returning to influential linear narrative video games of the 1980s, certain games did pursue narrative patterns aggressively. *The Legend of Zelda* is among the first games of the 1980s to prioritize storytelling. It influenced similar games that followed. Although "gameplay," was still important in the development of this game, narrative was highlighted. *The Legend of Zelda* is a narrative-based action-adventure video game. *Polygon* calls it one of the best games ever made ("The 500 Best Games of all Time: 100-1", n.p.). The plotline of *The Legend of Zelda* features an engaging romance quest. The avatar, a commoner named "Link" is involved in a magical quest in the kingdom of Hyrule aiming to save the princess Zelda and the nation from malevolent forces. The complexity of the game's narrative pattern was unparalleled at the time and *The Legend of Zelda* became a breakthrough in video game culture because of it.

According to the above-mentioned *Polygon* article, *The Legend of Zelda* introduced "players to a world and characters they would live with for years to come" (n.p.) Because this game featured such a well-crafted narrative, coupled with a meticulous "level" design, it is often

mistaken for a "role-playing [G]" game, which is a genre known for providing a highly interactive narrative experience for players. However, strictly speaking, *The Legend of Zelda* is not a role-playing game because it lacks several of the key elements of such games (e.g.; customizing one's own avatar, "levelling up [G]", enhancement of the avatar's abilities, etc.) *The Legend of Zelda* is a worthy example of early 1980s games that prioritize narrative within the form of a romance quest.

In the 1990s, linear narrative video games built on the examples set by their predecessors. New games improved player experiences. They also challenged the preconceptions of the medium, changing the nature of player interaction by providing novel ways for players to control their avatars. Some of the popular linear narrative video games of the 1990s include *Doom* (1993), *Tomb Raider* (1996), *Half-Life* (1998), *Metal Gear Solid* (1998), *Tenchu: Stealth Assassins* (1998), and *Thief: The Dark Project* (1998). Briefly put, *Doom* defined and perfected the gameplay of its genre, *Tomb Raider and Half-Life* merged strong gameplay and narrative, and games such as *Metal Gear Solid*, *Tenchu,* and *Thief* fundamentally changed the nature of player interactivity by introducing the new stealth genre. Almost all of the above games feature linear narrative plotlines that adhere to romance quest patterns.

Doom is among the games of the 1990s that continued the tradition of providing players an exciting gameplay experience infused with a simple storyline, much like its predecessors including *Castle Wolfenstein* and *Super Mario Bros.* The narrative line of this video game features an avatar nicknamed "Doomguy." This avatar, situated on Mars, fights his way through hordes of demons from hell who are trying to invade the Earth. This game presents its players with a simple plot. Its narrative is secondary to the highly engaging experience of the game which involves navigating different levels while attempting to stay alive upon encountering

countless demonic enemies. In the end, Doomguy prevails against the malevolent forces on Mars, only to find out that Earth has already been conquered by demons. Although he fails, his quest is noble, and initially appears to follow a romance pattern. However, the occupation of Earth by demonic forces shifts the plot into an ironic pattern. This shift anticipates game designs that follow. *Doom's* plot is linear, and the narrative cannot be altered by the player; in other words, doom is inevitable. The game builds on earlier video game mechanics by focusing on more engaging combat experiences and a heightened level design. According to Brown's above-mentioned essay, "The Year Stealth Games Got Serious | Game Maker's Toolkit," *Doom* is known as the game that defined and popularized the "first-person shooter [G]" genre to the point where other games in that format were called "Doom clones" (n.p.).

In contrast to gameplay-oriented video games such as *Doom*, *Tomb Raider* merged gameplay with an engaging narrative in unprecedented ways. Soon after its first release in 1996, *Tomb Raider* turned into a successful video game series, the latest installment of which was published in 2018 (*Shadow of the Tomb Raider*). The plot of *Tomb Raider* features Lara Croft, an archaeologist-adventurer who is approached by a wealthy businesswoman. Lara is hired to find a mysterious artefact known as the "Scion" within the mountains of Peru. Croft recovers the Scion but learns that her employer is corrupt, so she destroys the artefact and kills the wealthy businesswoman. Significantly, this plot begins with Croft as a mercenary. As such, the plot in this linear narrative further departs from previous romance models by shifting into an ironic form. Northrop Frye comments on ironic literary structures in his *Anatomy of Criticism* where he explains, "As structure, the central principle of ironic myth is best approached as a parody of romance: the application of romantic mythical forms to a more realistic content which fits them in unexpected ways" (208). Lara Croft as protagonist and avatar begins her quest out of self-

serving purposes. As such, her quest parodies quest conventions of romance structures, which feature selfless and noble goals, thus moving into an ironic structural form. *Tomb Raider* is one of the first high-profile video games featuring a linear narrative that moves into an ironic structure.

However, the game's ironic narrative does not take sole credit for its success. Another quality that made this game interesting and memorable was its high sense of adventure. Playing as Lara Croft offers the sensational experience of delving into ancient tombs and temples in search of rare or mystical artifacts. The game features superior visuals compared to video games of the 1980s, helping *Tomb Raider* capture the attention of wide audiences. Furthermore, the engaging level design and the increasing levels of ergodics in the form of puzzles that must be solved before Croft can progress attracted more players. The combination of these features makes the game's plot seem more interactive and, as a result, more intriguing. Soon, a new group of video games achieved high levels of player engagement through other means. These new games moved beyond the conventions of the medium by including stealth mechanics (hiding and sneaking) in their gameplay.

In 1998, stealth games emerged, challenging the typical approaches of combat and exploration in video games. These games were instrumental in changing the video game experience by increasing the degree of player interactivity through the incorporation of stealth elements. According to Mark Brown's essay, "The Year Stealth Games Got Serious | Game Maker's Toolkit" these new games succeeded at "establishing most of [the] core tenets" of stealth games, and included *Metal Gear Solid*, *Tenchu: Stealth Assassins*, and *Thief: The Dark Project"* (n.p.). The protagonists of stealth games are more physically vulnerable than the nearly invincible heroes/avatars in games such as *Doom*. Thus, the nature of players' interactions with

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games featuring stealth elements changed due to the increased vulnerability of the protagonist. Brute force was no longer the most effective way to complete a quest in these games. In stealth games, avatars must traverse the game more cautiously in order to succeed. Since the protagonists of stealth games became more susceptible to being physically hurt, these games offered a more immersive and believable world to their players.

Of the aforementioned three stealth games, *Tenchu: Stealth Assassins*, features a worthy quest that parallels romance patterns and involves a hero/avatar rooting out corruption and fighting evil. However, *Metal Gear Solid* and *Thief: The Dark Project* both feature ironic plots. The protagonist of *Metal Gear Solid* is unwilling to go on his quest and prioritizes selfish interests while evading corrupt and abusive governments and institutions. This game shifts into an ironic form featuring an unwilling hero on an unworthy quest who gains little by the end of the story. Similarly, *Thief* includes a protagonist on an unworthy quest which involves stealing various artifacts for a benefactor. This game also concludes with the protagonist losing an eye and gaining little. *Metal Gear Solid* and *Thief* exemplify how video games' evolving gameplay mechanics have affected their storytelling. The diversification of protagonists' characteristics through introducing physical vulnerability allows games such as *Metal Gear Solid* and *Thief* to tell ironic stories about fallible characters.

In the late 1990s, video games developed increasingly complex narratives. *Half-Life* was a video game that exemplified this approach. According to the article titled, "Half-Life Review," by Ron Dulin published in 1998 on the video game news and criticism website *Gamespot*, the linear first-person shooter game *Half-Life* was, "the closest thing to a revolutionary step the genre [had] ever taken" (n.p.) *Half-Life* engages players more directly by departing from the conventions of video games including tutorials and "cutscenes [G]". This departure increased

players' sense of connectivity to the avatar and enhanced their sense of immersion in the game's environment.

 IGN, another prolific video game website, cites *Half-Life* as the best first-person shooter game ever made and mentions that the game's "approach to storytelling has become the cornerstone of first-person shooter design" ("Top 100 First-Person Shooters" n.p.). *Gamespot* and *IGN* feature just two of the many articles and lists praising *Half-Life*'s approach to storytelling. According to Valve, the company that developed and published the game, *Half-Life* has received 51 "Game of the Year" awards and has been named "Best Game of All Time" by *PC Gamer* magazine in 1999, 2001, and 2005 ("Awards and Honors" n.p.).

 According to the aforementioned article published in *IGN, Half-Life* is among the first video games where scripted events are shown *within* the game instead of through cutscenes, a change that contributes to the game's "amazing sense of place" (n.p.). The article claims that creating such a world results in players believing the game to be more than just a "run-and-gun theme-park;" instead, they feel like there is a vibrant world in which terrible things are happening and they "just happen to be caught in the middle of it" (n.p.). Players are left to their own devices and must learn how to proceed within the game's narrative by learning indirectly or intuiting what is expected. For example, a character might casually tell the avatar how to use a tool or a weapon, and during the course of the game, that device becomes essential. The game's realism is improved by the fact that players must learn on the run. The *immersive* learning experience re-shapes the delivery of narrative in the game in unexpected and unpredictable ways, thereby adding to its appeal.

 This immersive learning approach was soon adopted broadly by other game developers in the 21st century. Some of the notable video games featuring linear narratives between 2000 and

2009 include *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001), *Half-Life 2* (2004), and *Portal* (2007). These games exemplify some of the aforementioned tenets of linear video game narratives and pave the way for new subgenres through their innovations. Some of these newer games, including *Grand Theft Auto III,* are credited with introducing mechanics such as the "open world [G]" approach, which is still deployed in many games today.

Half-Life 2 is the second and last game in the *Half-Life* series. This game does not require players to play through a tutorial. Coupled with a more engaging plot and more interesting characters compared to its predecessor, *Half-Life 2* gained popularity as a first-person shooter game and, according to the aforementioned article on *Valve*, earned 39 game of the year awards (n.p.). It is also noteworthy that, according to Oliver Chiang's article published on the business news website *Forbes* titled, "The Master of Online Mayhem," *Half-Life 2* had sold twelve million copies around the globe by 2011. Another influential game in the 21st century, *Portal* was created as a "mod [G]" (short for modification) for *Half-Life 2*. Initially, the *Portal* mod was a short but highly influential puzzle game situated in the *Half-Life* universe and was designed using the mechanics and art assets of *Half-Life 2*. However, later, *Portal* was expanded into an ironic standalone game.

Half-Life and *Half-Life 2* extend the ironic narrative approach evident earlier video games such as *Tomb Raider*. The plot of *Half-Life 2* features a scientist named Gordon Freeman as protagonist, in a world on the verge of an apocalypse under the rule of a corrupt government. Freeman becomes part of a resistance movement fighting against that government while protecting the Earth. Freeman's quest is rendered questionable because conditions for the approaching apocalyptic crisis are results of a misguided and corrupt government. Freeman is ironically named because government agents seek his capture and death. In addition, he does not

join the resistance on his own accord. Instead, he joins the group with the initial goal of self-preservation. Freeman pursues a questionable quest based on self-interest within a corrupt socio-political environment that contributes further to the narrative's ironic form.

Extending the tendency toward irony, *Grand Theft Auto III (GTA III)*, features a simple plot where a protagonist is forced to commit crimes because a family member of his is held hostage by malevolent forces. *GTA III* demonstrates how technological advances fundamentally changed video games. *GTA III* was certainly not the first video game featuring an open world. It was, however, the first game to successfully create an immersive and seemingly three-dimensional open world environment in which players could explore that area from a third-person perspective which made the game's visuals seem more realistic. The *Ultimate History of Video Games* website states that, through this innovation, *GTA III* became the "First modern realistic sandbox game" (n.p.). "Sandbox" and "open world" are synonymous terms in video game culture and industry. The same article suggests that *GTA III* features the "first big realistic city in videogames" (n.p.). The immersive aspect of this urban open world setting is a key feature that engages players more directly than previous game designs by providing more options through its open world approach, thereby offering players more agency.

Many of the linear games of the 2010s featured open world mechanics, brought about by *GTA III*, to allow for more player interaction in their narratives. Successful linear games of this decade exemplify how storytelling rose among video game developers' priorities. The most influential linear narrative games of this decade combined open world mechanics with engaging and interactive plots. The first type of successful linear games of the 2010s include open world games such as *Dark Souls* (2011). The second type, notably games such as *God of War* (2018) are successful at merging open world formats with sophisticated narratives. The third type

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includes games that prioritize their narratives, such as *Gone Home* (2013). All three of these video games feature ironic narrative forms shaped by corrupt socio-cultural environments and avatars/protagonists on questionable quests.

      Dark Souls uses the open world mechanics to enhance the sense of adventure for players. Through its intricate and interactive world-building, *Dark Souls* provides the pinnacle of what the video game industry calls "environmental storytelling [G]," meaning that the game tells its story through the *locations* players traverse, instead of through more traditional literary means such as dialogue. According to Mark Brown's essay, "Do We Need a Soulslike Genre | Game Maker's Toolkit", *Dark Souls* was so influential that many people believe it introduced a new genre dubbed "Soulslike" (n.p.). This name refers to action-adventure games that use open world environmental storytelling methods featuring dangerous and unforgiving settings.

      Another essential component of *Dark Soul*'s storytelling is its complex world design. The world of *Dark Souls* resembles a maze. Areas in this world do not have one entry and one exit. Instead, they lead into each other from different and often secret passages. The maze-like and ergodic design of this game echoes earlier games such as *Mouse in the Maze. Dark Soul*'s setting lacks maps for players to refer to, thereby requiring that players pay attention to the settings and navigate that world using their intuitive sense of direction, much like a person navigating an actual maze. The game's unforgiving "combat system [G]," which makes players feel unsafe and in perpetual danger, along with its demanding world design make players feel like they are on a gruesome adventure. Unlike *Dark Souls,* other open world games of this period such as *God of War* prioritize narrative in more traditional means and to a greater extent.

      God of War successfully blends open world mechanics with a sophisticated narrative to achieve an engaging sense of adventure. By prioritizing storytelling, *God of War* won the game

of the year award at the *2018 The Game Awards* ("2018" n.p.). It also won the 2019 Writers

Guild Award for the best "videogame writing" ("2019 Writers Guild Awards Winners &

Nominees" n.p.). *God of War* is the fourth major installment in the well-established series of the

same name. The previous three major games in the series, *God of War* (2005,) *God of War II*

(2007,) and *God of War III* (2010) were third person "hack and slash [G]" games with occasional

puzzles and simple plotlines. Hack and slash games aim for the best possible action-packed

combat system in which players must use various weapons to fight their way through numerous

enemies. Eight years after the release of the third game, the developers of the fourth game in the

series, simply titled *God of War* (2018) changed the hack and slash approach by centering the

game on the relationship between the protagonist, Kratos, a Greek deity of war, and his ten-year-

old son, Atreus. *God of War* focuses on the intricacies of the relationship between the deity of

war and his son as they embark on a journey to finalize the funerary rights of Faye, Kratos' wife

and Atreus' mother. This ironic plot eventually leads to the funeral rites for Faye amidst deceit

and social corruption.

      God of War remediates earlier literary works such as Sophocles' *Antigone* where

Antigone's authoritarian uncle Creon has prohibited the burial of Antigone's rebellious brother

Polyneices. Similar to *Antigone,* in *God of War,* Kratos and Atreus experience powerful

opposition by authoritative figures including the Æsir gods as they seek to finalize Faye's

funerary ritual. While they eventually succeed in the burial, they still have lost the most

important person in their lives. In addition, the Æsir gods are the source of widespread social

corruption and at the end of the narrative remain empowered. *God of War* also remediates other

earlier video games with linear narratives involving parent-child relationships who strive to

survive hostile social environments, such as *BioShock Infinite* (2013) and *The Last of Us* (2013).

Another sign of linear video games progressively prioritizing storytelling over other elements in the 2010s is the rise in popularity and success of narrative-based "indie ^{G}" games. These games are created by very small teams of developers with low budgets. Thus, instead of focusing on detailed and realistic graphics or creating complicated and vast settings, these games typically attempt to explore simple ways of telling stories. One of the most influential indie games of the 2010s is *Gone Home*. This game does not include any combat or mechanical challenges. Instead, it focuses on a female protagonist exploring her family house upon returning from a trip. The protagonist/avatar attempts to navigate the house while finding clues that uncover her sister's journey through a sexual identity crisis. Players can only walk around the house and look for objects they can interact with. As the avatar finds clues and solves puzzles, she learns about her sister through recorded audio files. It is significant that this game marks a departure from the masculine based ethos of the bulk of the games discussed above. Telling an intimate story in a simple setting with very simple ludic mechanics, *Gone Home* is an example of games developed by small teams that use the medium's fundamental qualities to respond to contemporary social issues, in this case, involving the social and familial issues facing members of the LGBTQ+ community.

The following two sections in this chapter will provide analyses of *BioShock Infinite* and *Darkest Dungeon.* These analyses will consider the developments of these games, their exploration of socio-political and ethical themes, the degree to which they remediate earlier literary forms, as well as their narrative patterns. Each section will close with a full plot summary of the examined video game.

BioShock Infinite

Games in the *BioShock* series are first-person shooter video games with linear narrative structures. Players are, essentially, enablers of a scripted plotline which they cannot affect in any way. The plotlines for the first two games in the series, *BioShock* (2007) and *BioShock 2* (2010), were both set in the 1960s and were situated in the fictional underwater city of Rapture. Published in 2013, *BioShock Infinite* was the third game in the *BioShock* series. Ken Levine and the main developers of *BioShock Infinite* chose an earlier hypothetical setting in 1912 located in the fictional floating city of Columbia, but he used 1950s aesthetics to design Columbia. According to an interview with Levine done by Andrew Laughlin, published in *Digital Spy,* titled "Telling tales: 'BioShock's Ken Levine on video game storytelling," the city of Columbia was inspired by Erik Larson's 2003 historical non-fiction book, *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America* (n.p.).

Larson's historical non-fiction book examined the international socio-political posture of the United States at the time of the 1983 Chicago World's Fair. Larson's book informs the socio-political disposition of *BioShock Infinite*. The 1983 Chicago World Fair was titled "The World's Columbian Exposition" in honor of the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus in North America, although this anniversary event came nine years early. The very fact that this "Expo" celebrated Columbus also indicated a disregard for the Indigenous peoples of the Americas whose plight and exploitation began with the arrival of Columbus. In addition, the Chicago World's fair forwarded an ethos of "manifest destiny." As defined by Robert J. Miller in his 2006 book titled *Native America, Discovered and Conquered: Thomas Jefferson, Lewis & Clark, And Manifest Destiny,* manifest destiny is a nineteenth-century doctrine or belief that includes three consistent themes: "1. The special virtues of the American people and their

institutions; 2. America's mission to redeem and remake the world in the image of America; and, 3. A divine destiny under God's direction to accomplish this wonderful task" (120). The narrative of *BioShock Infinite* explores and reveals the problematic aspects of "manifest destiny" from different perspectives. Among the most important of these problematic aspects is the systemic racism and violence against the Indigenous peoples of America as well as other people of colour under the rule of religious and totalitarian institutions of power.

In "The Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street and 'BioShock Infinite': How a video game is Reflecting Life" a 2011 interview conducted by Hayley Tsukayama published in *The Washington Post* website*,* Levine discusses another real-world inspiration for *BioShock Infinite,* namely the Occupy Wall Street Movement (n.p.). *BioShock Infinite* shows the same disdain towards unethical institutions of power as the Occupy Wall Street Movement which, according to the movement's website, started in 2011 and fought "against the corrosive power of major banks and multinational corporations" (n.p.). In addition, in an interview with Chris Suellentrop in the *Wired* website titled, "Why *BioShock Infinite's* Creator Won't Settle for Success," Levine lists Stanley Kubrick's 1980 movie, *The Shining*, and David Lynch's 1986 movie *Blue Velvet* as other inspirations for *BioShock Infinite* (n.p.). Kubrick's *The Shining* and Lynch's *Blue Velvet* feature fictive or alternate realities in which Surreal and psychological disturbances manifest themselves in actuality. While Kubrick's cinematic style might be more technical and Lynch's more visceral, both involve extreme social dysfunction, resistance to abuse, and primary characters trying to avoid life-threatening situations. Such elements are also evident in *BioShock Infinite.*

The plot of the latest game in this series, *BioShock Infinite* features a Caucasian male hero, Booker DeWitt, trying to pay off a debt by freeing a young girl who has been imprisoned

by the totalitarian ruler of the floating city of Columbia. The city autocrat is planning to indoctrinate the young woman, who is, in actuality, Booker's daughter, in order to groom her to be the city's next leader. The story is complicated by the fact that Zachary Comstock, the autocratic ruler of the city of Columbia is the same person as Booker but in a parallel dimension. Initially, Booker is not aware that the young woman, named Elizabeth, is *his* daughter as well. Before the events of the game, Booker was involved, as part of the American army, in the Wounded Knee Massacre which happened in South Dakota, December 29, 1890. The battle was a massacre of several hundred Lakota civilians by soldiers of the United States Army. After the massacre, Booker is presented with two options to ease his guilty conscious, both of which are realized, though in two different universes. *BioShock Infinite* interposes different dimensions and time frames. There are two main dimensions or realities depicted in this game's narrative. By providing multiple alternate worlds, *BioShock Infinite* evokes the "Many-Worlds" interpretation of quantum mechanics. Additionally, the full name of the avatar, Booker DeWitt echoes the founder of the "Many-Worlds" interpretation, Bryce DeWitt. This interpretation posits that every possible outcome of any quantum measurement becomes a reality in a separate universe, resulting in infinite possible universes. According to the Stanford University website, "The Many-Worlds Interpretation (MWI) of quantum mechanics holds that there are many worlds which exist in parallel at the same space and time as our own" (n.p.). The "Many Worlds" concept raises curious questions about alternate realities, as well as being, and human identity, which are all explored in *BioShock Infinite.*

For example, in one reality, following the Wounded Knee Massacre and overcome by guilt, Booker seeks to be baptized and is "reborn" as a righteous man, taking the new identity of Zachary Comstock who holds a self-righteous attitude and founds the floating city of Columbia.

In the second reality, Booker does not go through the baptism, but instead leads a dissolute life, gambling and drinking, getting married, and falling into debt while caring for his daughter after his wife dies giving birth. This version of Booker who is the player's avatar has no particular moral compass and sells his infant daughter in order to clear the debt he has acquired while gambling. Booker immediately regrets this decision and attempts to get his daughter back from the buyer, who is later revealed to be Comstock, but is unsuccessful. We also learn that *prior* to the start of the game, Comstock found a way to reach Booker's dimension. Due to unforeseen circumstances, Comstock was rendered infertile and chose to kidnap Booker's daughter to raise as his own while grooming her for leadership. It is Booker's intention to rescue his daughter from Comstock after gaining access to his alter-ego's dimension. In order to succeed in *BioShock Infinite* quest, Booker must ultimately destroy his own autocratic alter-ego at the moment of his inception (the baptism,) thereby killing *himself* in the process. A player "wins" the game when Booker prevents his own reincarnation as Comstock.

BioShock Infinite's narrative requires the player to destroy the totalitarian mental condition of Comstock as alter-ego, even though it spells doom for the protagonist as well. The mentality of "us versus them" is also challenged in the story, forcing the protagonist/player to reflect upon their role in the wrongdoings they witness. One of the main aspects of the narrative that encourages the protagonist/player to rethink their role in social ills of the game's world is the relationship between Booker and the Indigenous peoples of America. Violence against the Indigenous peoples is clearly portrayed as one of the darkest deeds of Booker's past and, as such, becomes part of the socio-political aspects of the narrative. However, the narrative is centered on Booker, his alternate future self, and his daughter. No Indigenous character or community is introduced to the narrative and, as such, the pain and suffering caused by Booker is reduced to a

narrative device and is not adequately explored in the narrative. It is important to note that Booker does not "fix" his involvement in the Wounded Knee Massacre, is never forgiven or redeemed for his deeds, and does not play the role of a "white saviour" for the Indigenous peoples at the end. *BioShock infinite* tells its story only from the point of view of its Caucasian protagonist. However, by not redeeming Booker of his violent and racist deeds and not attempting to "undo" such social issues by using time travel elements, the game accentuates the importance of such social perils in the real world.

The plot and the origin of this game both reveal anti-establishmentarianism as a key feature and force players to face the social and psychological ramifications of colonialism. The structure of the game is fundamentally linear, and always ends with Booker dying in his attempts to topple the autocratic government of the floating city of Columbia while trying to rescue his daughter. The structure of this linear plotline is a tragic romance since the hero is on a worthy quest but *must* die in in the process in order to succeed. Nonetheless, the goal is achieved following Booker/Comstock's death. The key premise in *BioShock Infinite's* linear narrative involves the dialectic between hate and tolerance. *BioShock Infinite* primarily alludes to racially oriented social ills predominant in the United States and other nations and force players to face the social and psychological ramifications of colonialism. The game satirizes the dynamics of these social ills by critiquing the institutes of governmental power that are based on racism and discrimination.

The game-as-satire's token fantasy remediates or finds parallels with earlier literary forms including the floating island of Laputa in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), as well as the oppression of one social group by another. The inequitable social hierarchy in *BioShock Infinite* also parallels Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). Other affinities can be found

with early literary works such as *The Description of a New World, Called Blazing-World* (1666) by Margaret Cavendish which satirizes the English government and patriarchy. In both *BioShock Infinite,* and in Cavendish's novel, a young woman enters another world, and becomes the empress or leader of that society. Other parallels can be found with Arthurian legend, because in both the ruler must die in order to topple a dysfunctional governmental model. In addition, in both *BioShock Infinite* and the Persian myth of "Arash the Archer" (*Khordeh Avesta,* 151) the protagonist must sacrifice himself in order to liberate the land. *BioShock Infinite* takes on an ironic pattern that moves into the satiric. The protagonist-avatar begins a quest without any knowledge of its purpose and starts in pursuit of purely selfish intentions.

  BioShock Infinite features all of the satiric elements outlined by Northrop Frye in the third essay of *Anatomy of Criticism* titled, "The Mythos of Winter: Irony and Satire," where he defines satire and lists its qualities (223-43)*.* Specifically, the game features a token fantasy (autocratic floating island of Columbia), both individual and institutional objects of attack (greed, ignorance, violence, and racial discrimination), digression (tangential sub-quests while in pursuit of a main goal), inversion of appropriate social values (hate superseding tolerance), social anatomies (dissecting the socio-politics of Columbia), and parody of archetypal literary patterns (indicated by the remediations drawn from the afore-mentioned literary works). As a satiric work, *BioShock Infinite* aims to inspire personal and social change in its audience by pointing out the immoral shortcomings of the player's society. As part of its mission to inspire change, *BioShock Infinite's* satiric form raises significant questions about the *apparent* dichotomy between what might be considered the forces of "good" and the forces of "evil" but in *BioShock Infinite* the difference between purported "good" and supposed "evil" is rendered unclear, and revealed to be part of a false dialectic.

The differences between so-called agents of "good" and "evil" in *BioShock Infinite* are often blurred and, through this blurring, the game deconstructs the false dialectic of "good" and "evil." Deconstruction was put forward as a concept by Jacques Derrida. According to Paul de Man, a prominent practitioner of deconstruction as interpreted by him, in the book *A Recent imagining: interviews with Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, Paul De Man*, "[i]t's possible, within any text, to frame a question or undo assertions made in the text, by means of elements which are in the text, which frequently would be precisely structures that play off the rhetorical against grammatical elements" (156). Based on de Man's description of deconstruction, *BioShock Infinite* depicts a false dialectic involving good and evil and then dismantles that dialectic.

The three steps taken by *BioShock Infinite* to deconstruct the *apparent* premises of its own social structure include establishing a thesis, an antithesis, and an aporia, leading to a deconstructive result. First, "evil" is supposedly perpetuated by a malevolent dominant social group (city of Columbia). Second, "good" is presumed to be advanced by a benevolent social group resisting "evil" (the armed rebels named Vox Populi). Third, an "aporia" or inherent contradiction within this false dialectic is revealed when one learns that *both* "good" and "evil" are driven by hatred. By exposing hatred as the shared motivation behind forces of both "good" and "evil," *BioShock Infinite* posits that neither approach is correct, and that all groups *should* be motivated by mutual respect and tolerance, thereby indicating an egalitarianism that is absent throughout the game. The purpose of any satiric work is to inspire the audiences to instigate desirable social reform. The three-step process mentioned above aims to serve this enlightening purpose by calling the player's attention to similar contradictions in their own societies.

The deconstruction of the false dialectic between "good" and "evil" also allows *BioShock Infinite* to examine the provisionality of "truth" within the game's world. The provisionality of "truth" is explained by Michel Foucault in an interview titled, "Truth and Power." Foucault defines "truth" as follows, "Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its régime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true" (131). Foucault continues this definition and specifies the origin of the established structure of "truth" in societies as follows, "it is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media); lastly, it is the issue of a whole political debate and social confrontation ('ideological' struggles)" (1279). Based on this definition, if one wishes to identify the "truth," then one must also examine institutions of power in one's society. By revealing the "regimes" of truth associated with "good and "evil," *BioShock Infinite* forces the player to face the shortcomings of any nation's constructed truth, especially that of the United States.

As demonstrated before, *BioShock Infinite* refuses to accept socially constructed concepts such as "good" and "evil" at their face value. Instead, the narrative of this game deconstructs "good" and "evil" and attempts to find and topple the shared and problematic qualities that are integral to concepts of "good" or "evil" as they emerge from socio-politically constructed regimes of *questionable* truths. Through this process, *BioShock Infinite* closely examines the institutions of power within the city of Columbia and reveals how they operate on hate and intolerance, concepts that are very much active and present in the United States. By revealing the inner workings of such regimes of provisional "truths," this narrative highlights problematic and influential socially-constructed values in the United States; involving concepts such as

patriotism, freedom, power, and religion. When playing this game, the player is faced <u>with</u> contradictory "truths," constructed by Columbia, in contrast to those independent of Columbia's regimes of power. The game communicates the dysfunctionality of "truth" as it is constructed by Columbia's rulers. Thus, players are shown the utopian façade of the city, which is soon revealed to be immoral, violent, and unjust. *BioShock Infinite* does not offer an unrealistic solution in an attempt to resolve the social ills of Columbia definitively. Instead, the game operates as a satire and will ideally inspire desirable social change in players who engage with the game's ethics and questions involving the provisionality of "truth".

BioShock Infinite plot summary

In 1912, Booker DeWitt (players' avatar) is taken to an island lighthouse in a small boat by two people who are later identified as the Lutece twins. These are the two afore-mentioned "secondary characters." There, Booker is told to bring "the girl" (Elizabeth) to an unknown person or location in order to "wipe away the debt" due to his gambling losses. The lighthouse is also a rocket silo and sends Booker to Columbia, a heavily religious, supposedly utopian city floating in the sky. It is soon revealed that the rulers of Columbia and the majority of its citizens subscribe to deeply racist and religious extremist ideologies.

In Columbia, Booker is soon pursued by the authorities when they notice his scar bearing the letters "AD", matching the description of a prophesied "False Shepherd." According to the prophesy this "False Shepherd" is to take Elizabeth, the daughter of Comstock, Columbia's ruler/prophet and lead her astray thereby leaving Columbia without a righteous leader. In his effort to "wipe away the debt," Booker frees Elizabeth from her tower-prison, successfully eluding her warden, "Songbird," a giant mechanical bird. They escape aboard an airship and

Booker promises to take Elizabeth to Paris, where she always wanted to go. Instead of keeping his word, however, Booker takes her to New York in order to deliver Elizabeth to the Lutece twins, so that he can be freed of his debt. Realizing she has been deceived by Booker, Elizabeth knocks him out, and takes control of the airship. When Booker wakes up, he finds Daisy Fitzroy, the leader of the armed rebels called *Vox Populi*. Daisy offers to return the ship to Booker and Elizabeth if they help *Vox Populi* fight the leaders of Columbia.

Booker and Elizabeth start working on securing weapons by reaching a local gunsmith in order to help *Vox Populi*. Due to the complications in their path, Elizabeth uses her power to open space-time rifts or "tears" that give her access to alternate realities. Mindful of Booker's help in rescuing her, and in order to save both herself and Booker, Elizabeth takes the pair to a different point in space-time, one in which Booker is dead and considered a martyr to *Vox Populi's* cause. Booker's apparent "sacrifice" has sparked an open war between *Vox Populi* and Columbia which has resulted in *Vox Populi's* favor. However, the *Vox Populi* revolutionary forces prove to be overly radical in their beliefs as well. The majority of Daisy's revolutionary forces are composed of marginalized visible minority groups, who aim to kill the dominant socio-political group controlling Columbia. That dominant group is predominantly Caucasian. Upon learning of the planned annihilation of innocent people Elizabeth changes her perspective. During a moment when Daisy is about to kill a Columbian child, Elizabeth reacts by killing Daisy.

Booker and Elizabeth resume control of the airship and attempt to leave. However, Songbird now alerted to Elizabeth's escape attacks and takes Elizabeth back towards her tower-prison. It is revealed that the tower-prison was designed by the Lutece twins at the request of Zachary Comstock with the purpose of containing Elizabeth's powers. The tower has been

named the "Siphon." At this point, Elizabeth is revealed to be Comstock's *adopted* daughter, whom he planned to make Columbia's leader after his death. Comstock also plotted to kill his wife, Lady Comstock, and the Lutece twins, to hide the truth. Booker starts pursuing Elizabeth and Songbird but is transported to 1984 by a version of Elizabeth who was not rescued by Booker. This second Elizabeth comes from an alternate world, thereby evoking the afore mentioned "Many Worlds" theory. In this alternate world, Elizabeth is elderly and informs Booker that she was tortured and brainwashed for decades, ultimately accepting to rule over Columbia and to wage war on Earth. The alternate Elizabeth then gives Booker a clue to help him defeat Songbird and returns him to Columbia.

Using that clue, Booker rescues Elizabeth, and the pair go after Comstock in his airship. Comstock urges Booker to tell Elizabeth of her past and to tell her how she lost her little finger, implying that Booker knows more than he seems to. Booker denies knowing about Elizabeth's past, but a stern and confident Elizabeth tells him he has simply forgotten. They begin to argue and an enraged Booker smashes Comstock's head on a baptismal font, where he drowns him. The irony of this death illuminates the larger premises of the game in which one's self must destroy one's alter-ego to achieve success. Booker and Elizabeth then employ the help of Songbird to destroy the Siphon. Songbird has abandoned loyalty to Comstock in favor of Elizabeth. Destroying the tower "Siphon" allows Elizabeth to use her full power, opening a tear and time-space while transporting herself and Booker to the island lighthouse Booker visited in the beginning of the narrative.

Elizabeth, now extremely powerful and assertive, explains to Booker that there are countless alternate versions of Booker and Elizabeth, each the result of a different decision that could have been made. The alternate dimension again echo DeWitt's "Many Worlds" theory.

Elizabeth then takes Booker to 1893, and they watch as Robert Lutece (one of the twins) asks

Booker to give his infant daughter to Comstock in order to "wipe away the debt". It is revealed

that Elizabeth's name was originally Anna DeWitt. Booker initially agrees, but changes his mind

immediately, chasing Lutece and his child. He is unable to rescue her daughter from Comstock's

grasp as he seizes the infant girl from Lutece's hand through a "tear" in time-space. Comstock

barely escapes with the child, and the closing of the "tear" in time-space catches Anna's little

finger, severing it. Comstock raises Anna as Elizabeth, whose severed finger allowed her to exist

simultaneously in two realities, giving her the power to tear through time-space. Grieving over

the loss of his daughter, Booker carves the letters "AD" on his palm, thereby creating the scar

that later identified him the "False Shepherd." Attempting to right the wrong, the mercenary

minded scientist Robert Lutece, convinces his twin, the female version of him from a different

space-time reality, to help him bring Booker to Columbia to rescue Elizabeth. It is also revealed

that Booker went to Columbia willingly in an effort to take back his daughter, but the mental

strain of crossing dimensions caused him to forget Anna and left him in terror of a "debt" he did

not remember owing.

Near the end of the adventure Elizabeth explains to Booker that to put an end to the

suffering of infinite Bookers and Elizabeths, they need to kill Comstock, Booker's alter-ego at

the moment of his re-birth. She then takes Booker back to his own baptism following the

massacre at the Battle of "Wounded Knee." While Booker remembers changing his mind and *not*

going through with the baptism, Elizabeth reveals that there are other universes in which he

accepted the baptism and was "reborn" as Zachary Comstock. In this way, the narrative again

raises the "Many Worlds" theory. At this point, Booker understands and accepts that he has to

die at the moment of his baptism and re-birth. He is joined by multiple Elizabeths from many

worlds, and Booker is drowned by them in the baptismal font, thereby preventing his "rebirth" as Comstock. The many possible Bookers and Comstocks are thus eliminated across many worlds, as one by one the Elizabeths kill them. Afterwards, one by one, the Elizabeths disappear and the screen cuts to black.

Darkest Dungeon

Published in 2016, *Darkest Dungeon* is a "turn-based [G]," role-playing game with a linear plotline in which players control an unseen avatar who employs multiple adventurers or mercenaries to fight through various dungeons, towards the titular "darkest dungeon." This game is a mix of CRPG's (Computer Role-Playing Games) and "Roguelikes [G]," although it does not adhere to all criteria of both genres. As a CRPG, *Darkest Dungeon* includes adventuring characters who are controlled by the player, gaining experience as they take part in excavations of dungeons and level up, thereby acquiring better abilities as a result. Players can customize characters whose names and appearances can be modified. As a Roguelike game *Darkest Dungeon* includes randomly or "procedurally generated [G]" dungeons and battles, as well as the possibility of irreversible character death. Before examining the implications of the blend of CRPG and Roguelike features, I will briefly mention the inspirations behind this game and summarize the game's plotline.

According to their article "Game Design Deep Dive: Darkest Dungeon's Affliction System," published in *Gamasutra* (2015), Chris Bourassa, and Tyler Sigman who developed the *Darkest Dungeon* game explain that *Darkest Dungeon* was released in 2016 by Red Hook Studios, a six-person studio out of British Columbia, Canada (n.p.) In an article titled "How Darkest Dungeon found new horror through its turn-based combat" published on the video game

criticism and news website *Rock Paper Shotgun,* video game critic Alex Wiltshire explains that *Darkest Dungeon* moves away from the traditional "top-down view [G]" of party-based role-playing games, while maintaining many of the characteristics of that genre. Instead, players engage with an assembled group of mercenary adventurers and players' avatars function on the same level as the mercenary group (n.p.).

In the aforementioned articles, Bourassa and Sigman explain that although the game is generally inspired by the work of H. P. Lovecraft, the team did not want to use the concept of insanity which is recurrent in many other prominent games inspired by Lovecraft (e.g.; *Call of Cthulhu: The Official Video Game* [2018], or *Elder Sign: Omens* [2011]). Instead of depicting how the horrors of battle and stressful situations might simply drive characters to insanity, *Darkest Dungeon* focuses on the effects of such situations on the human psyche in more diverse ways. The team also took inspiration from television and cinema including the 2001 drama miniseries *Band of Brothers,* and the 1986 movie *Aliens.* Both the television mini-series and the movie feature groups of characters who are faced with intense peril while some of them die. The characters must cope psychologically with immense stress loads. In addition, the game's final antagonist is dubbed "Heart of Darkness" a clear allusion to Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella. If one pursues this connection, then, Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 movie *Apocalypse Now* also can be recognized as an influence on *Darkest Dungeon.* In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* the narrator-protagonist, Charles Marlow tells of the events that led to his appointment as captain of a river steamboat for an ivory trading company. Along the route, Marlow encounters Kurtz, a manager who runs an ivory trading station for the company. Marlow notes that the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" commissioned Kurtz to write a report, in which he referred to the indigenes, declaring "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad, 83). Kurtz is ill and

dies at the end of the novella, whispering the words "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad 116).

This phrase recurs in *Darkest Dungeon* occasionally when one of the indigenous mercenaries experiences mortal injuries. At the end of Conrad's novel, Marlow returns to Europe embittered and contemptuous of the so-called "civilized" world. Similarly, in the movie *Apocalypse Now,* Marlow's parallel, named Benjamin L. Willard, travels up a river during the second Indochina war, to track a rogue U.S. military leader named Kurtz with orders to "terminate" him. Kurtz subdues Willard and shares his sadistic and ruthless views on war. Willard frees himself and manages to kill Kurtz who whispers "The horror… The horror..." as he dies. In both the novella and the movie, indigenes revere the Kurtz figures, despite the fact that Kurtz dehumanizes them. The emerging narrative in *Darkest Dungeon* echoes both Conrad's novella and Coppola's movie.

 Darkest Dungeon's plot is linear and seemingly simple. The unnamed protagonist inherits a large piece of land, called the "Estate," from an ancestor, called the "Narrator." Players get to know the Narrator through his journal. As players progress through the game, scattered pages of that journal are found, explaining that the Narrator left his comfortable life to search through dungeons that mysteriously appeared on his estate. The Narrator then excavated his land to find more dungeons but, in the process, drove himself to madness and, ultimately, committed suicide after leaving the Estate to his relative, who becomes the protagonist. Upon identifying increasingly evil and powerful entities in the dungeons, the protagonist/avatar's task is to exterminate all of those evils. After clearing the last and darkest dungeon, it is revealed that the Narrator's spirit has joined the evils underneath the Estate and that the protagonist's fight against these evil creatures is part an endless cycle and a curse upon the family lineage. As one progresses through the various dungeons the evil entities become increasingly powerful and

challenging. For those who are interested, a more detailed plot summary can be found at the end of this section.

Darkest Dungeon's linear narrative is ironic as the protagonist begins the quest out of self-interest while pursuing an impossible goal. All players who complete the game eventually discover that the Ancestor himself is one of the primary sources of evil and that their avatars are progenies of the corrupt and cursed dead Ancestor. This revelation happens after clearing the final Dungeon. One can imagine players' "horror" at arriving at an epiphany, upon gaining this knowledge about their Ancestor. Physical manifestations of evil can be temporarily destroyed in this game, but the narrative clarifies that the protagonist's quest will be in vain because evil will always return. The impossibility of entirely overcoming evil is confirmed when, in the final dungeon, the mercenaries encounter the Ancestor's spirit, who is now "an Avatar of the Crawling Chaos," working for evil purposes. Upon defeating the Ancestor, the adventurers must then fight the "Heart of Darkness," a force of destruction incarnate.

As indicated earlier, the term "Heart of Darkness" alludes to Joseph Conrad's novella of the same name. Examining the similarities and differences between *Darkest Dungeon* and *Heart of Darkness* reveals the narrative focus of the game. Conrad's novel depicts a series of oppressive company stations that exploits indigenous inhabitants as laborers. These oppressive stations in the novel are similar to the game's dungeons, in which hired mercenaries are forced to fight until they are either dead or disposed of. Other parallels include the psychological impacts of extreme stress which the game explores through its interactive mechanics. Differences between *Darkest Dungeon* and *Heart of Darkness* include their stance on the idea of evil as arising from an "other world." In his article, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,'" Chinua Achebe criticizes Conrad's novella, noting that "*Heart of Darkness* projects

the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant beastiality" (2). Based on Achebe's critique, the inherent colonialism in *Heart of Darkness* causes it to view non-European cultures as "otherworldly" and, thereby, deems it appropriate to project the idea of evil onto the indigenous workers, hence Kurtz' comment, "Exterminate the brutes." On the other hand, the evils in *Darkest Dungeon* are truly otherworldly and include creatures such as skeletons, sirens, and ghosts. The *imagined* evils in *Heart of Darkness* arise only through characters *projecting* their ideologies onto others, whereas *Darkest Dungeon* eventually uses imaginary evils to make players assess their own morality. In *Power/Knowledge Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977,* and in the aforementioned interview, "Truth and Power," Michel Foucault notes that "truth" should be understood as an effect of regimes of truth related to power structures and these effects are evident only by considering the development of such power structures through historical analysis (131). In *Darkest Dungeon* the history of the Estate is revealed through the Ancestor's journal. However, that history is part of the Ancestor's power structure as the landlord. At the outset of the game, it may not occur to question whether the Ancestor's views are somehow biased. However, by the end of the game, it becomes evident that the entire family line is evil, including the player's avatar. Achebe's assessment of Conrad's novella challenges the perspective in Conrad's novella. Both in *Heart of Darkness* and in *Darkest Dungeon* "truth" is relative to the position of the observer, particularly when considering existing power structures.

The militaristic aspects of *Darkest Dungeon* find parallels with Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. Similarities between *Darkest Dungeon* and *Apocalypse Now* include a series of military attacks against enemy encampments which parallel the dungeons in the game. As in Conrad's

Heart of Darkness, the main source of contention in the movie is a character named Kurtz who has gone mad and treats the indigenous people of the region as lesser otherworldly beings. The madness of Kurtz in the movie parallels the mental disease of the Narrator in *Darkest Dungeon.* Eventually, the Narrator's madness infects the protagonist/avatar who proceeds on a killing spree throughout the game. Just as Kurtz controls the Montagnard troops, so the protagonist/avatar of the game dictates every aspect of the local mercenary adventurers who live and die by the protagonist's word. Conrad's novel, Coppola's movie, and *Darkest Dungeon* all feature concepts of violence used to dominate "otherworldly" beings within ironic plotlines. In each case, the protagonist undergoes a questionable quest that brings about little gain while at arriving at a horrific epiphany concerning the relative "truth" of the situation.

The narrative of *Darkest Dungeon* arises though the actions of narrator/avatar. A history providing the background for this game is delivered by the Narrator either as short speeches before big and important fights or through his journal. However, the short lines spoken before fights act more as flavor for these fights than as a narrative device. It is significant that this journal is largely irrelevant to the player's progress though the game, although it provides a secondary point of interest while establishing a historical context to the player's adventures. The history of the Estate is presented to players through the journal. However, that history is only available in fragments that are unlocked as one proceeds through various dungeons in the game. In addition, while engaging with the core mechanics of this game, which include exploring dungeons and clearing them of foes, players do not have access to all of the journal's fragments. If players wish to read any of the unlocked fragments of the journal, then they must delay any action in the game and open a designated page which reveals those portions of the journal in text form one piece at a time. Fragments of the ancestor's journal are found by player-controlled

mercenaries among items of "loot ^{G}" as each dungeon is liberated. Mercenaries are only permitted to carry a limited number of items of loot out of any of the dungeons. Such items may include gold and magical objects which assist players in their paths to completing the game. Even though a page from a journal is composed of thin paper it still counts as a loot item and might be deemed less useful or valuable than other loot items. Players can read a discovered page from the ancestor's journal within the dungeon where it was acquired and discard it as they progress, or they can assemble all of the written fragments of the journal by bringing them back to the hamlet where they can be stored and later read in chronological order. The Narrator's journal does not have any mechanical or gameplay effect on the player's success. It is provided merely as a curiosity to unlock, and as a historical context the game.

The main narrative in *Darkest Dungeon* arises from players' approaches which shape their experience of the game while reflecting their morality. The first approach, the "expeditious" route is to consider the mercenaries expendable, and to proceed with clearing of dungeons at full speed. The second approach takes an "empathetic" route in which the player tries to protect the physical and mental well-being of the hired mercenaries. These two ways of playing the game require players to make an unprompted moral choice as whether or not they will dehumanize or humanize their hired mercenaries. So, while the basic narrative of *Darkest Dungeon* involves the clearing of a series of monster infested dungeons, a significant aspect of the narrative involves the manner of player engagement. The path players choose involves a *moral choice* regarding the expeditious or empathetic approach, which ultimately shapes the narrative of the video game.

The control players have over *Darkest Dungeon*'s narrative is assisted by the game's use of a unique mix of genres. Through its CRPG elements, *Darkest Dungeon* offers the option of customizing the mercenaries to create a more personalized experience for players. The game's

Roguelike properties, on the other hand, put these customized characters and parties in danger of permanent death. Unlike other video games, players cannot restart or reload the game in order to override the loss of a character. The looming threat of losing a favorite adventurer may engage players on an emotional level. Thus, players can experience a prolonged state of tension arising from their emotional engagement with their mercenaries when playing *Darkest Dungeon*. Alternately, a player can remain detached from the mercenary adventurers. Either way, the game involves moral choices which affect and shape the narrative of the unnamed protagonist, each time one plays the game. This moves *Darkest Dungeon* onto a meta-textual level because players are directly involved with the moral choices offered by the game. So, while the basic narrative involves clearing a series of dungeons, a meta-narrative involves a series of moral choices by the player. *Darkest Dungeon's* moral choices are enhanced by a game mechanic called the "Affliction System."

Through the Affliction System, *Darkest Dungeon* encompasses the physical health of the mercenaries as well as their mental health. Mercenaries accumulate stress as they traverse the dungeons and face the terrible foes within. If their stress levels cross a certain threshold, they are afflicted with potentially fatal mental conditions including paranoia, hopelessness, abusive behavior towards allies, etc. Mercenaries under the effects of these conditions might act according to their affliction instead of the player's will, potentially harming allied mercenaries in different ways.

The Affliction System makes the game even more difficult, since upon gaining more stress after being afflicted mercenaries might suffer illness and perish. Furthermore, even when afflicted mercenaries' deaths are avoided, they will remain plagued with afflictions after returning from dungeons and will remain under the effects of those afflictions in subsequent

dungeon assaults. These afflictions are manifested either as lines of monologue or actions in battle. While physical wounds heal instantly after returning from a dungeon battle, mercenaries' psychological wounds, which include depression or demoralization, only can be healed in one of two ways. They can be healed before leaving the most recent dungeon battle site in which the mercenary acquired the affliction, or, after returning to the local hamlet, where players can spend large amounts of "in-game resources [G]" to cure those afflicted. It is important to note that the available "cures" for afflictions are problematic or dangerous in of themselves.

Upon their return to the hamlet, afflicted or stressed mercenaries have to spend time in either the Abbey or the Tavern to lose their afflictions or to reduce their stress levels. Each building offers three spaces for healing; the Abby provides the Cloister, the Transept, or the Penance Hall, while the Tavern allows adventurers to heal at the Bar, the Gambling Hall, or the Brothel. An afflicted or stressed adventurer may occupy only *one* of the six spaces and that visitation can heal them. However, the healing techniques themselves may prove to be addictive. Addiction to any of the six available options makes it more difficult to manage adventurers' stress levels because they become unresponsive to other forms of healing. Addictions can also affect the adventurers' combat and social capabilities. For example, overexposure to the Penance Hall might cause an adventurer to acquire a desire for masochism and relish getting injured in battle. Alternately, visiting the Bar can cause alcoholism, or the Gambling Hall might cause pathological or compulsive gambling disorders, while visiting the Brothel can cause sex addiction. Each addiction mentioned above has its unique and negative effects on combat abilities. For example, an adventurer who is addicted to gambling might take unforeseen or unnecessary risks in a combat situation, and such acts would move beyond the control of the player. The Affliction System and possible addictions that might follow, inevitably put

adventurers in danger of mental illness. As such, while playing *Darkest Dungeon,* players must make a covert but morally charged decision: whether or not they care about their employees' mental health. All of the above situations contribute directly to the game's meta-narrative.

The moral implications of *Darkest Dungeon* arise from the Affliction System's advantages and disadvantages, and the moral questions that system poses to players. It is possible and even encouraged by the game's mechanics to ignore the stress level of adventurers and the state of their mental health. Players can take advantage of the superior treasures found by stressed adventurers and avoid spending their acquired in-game currency or resources to heal afflicted characters. Players who choose to do so, can simply dismiss afflicted characters upon their return to the hamlet and replace them with new mercenaries who might eventually suffer the same fate. The accumulated in-game currency gained by an expeditious player can then be used on one favored group of four elite mercenary adventurers to optimize their performance and ensure that they can survive the ferocity of the final battle. Employing an expeditious tactic in approaching *Darkest Dungeon* results in a faster and easier completion of the game since, in the end, players can take only four adventurers to the final battle. However, this tactic has significant moral implications. Choosing to ignore adventurers' afflictions dehumanizes them and can cause players to feel more distanced from characters they control. Again, this aligns with some of the attitudes alluded to earlier in this concerning the extermination of "subhuman brutes." Players' choices involving the expeditious or empathetic routes will shape the game's meta-narrative.

In a 2019 interview with David Marchese for the online *New York Times* magazine, Pulitzer Prize winner and socio-cultural theorist, Robert Caro, an expert on concepts of power and its effects, comments on the cliché that power corrupts but maintains that "power does not always corrupt," but that it reveals the tendencies of the person who wields it (n.p.). Players'

choices in *Darkest Dungeon* can be affected or arguably "corrupted" by their use of the power they are granted in the game, particularly if they choose the expeditious route. But some players may feel less corrupted when wielding power by choosing the empathetic path.

The expeditious route is the easiest towards the completion of the game. Players who choose this approach prioritize easier completion of the game by ignoring their mercenaries' well-being. The game's reaction to choosing this route is to present the player with easier progress. However, every mercenary who dies while in such a player's service can be seen in the "Graveyard" section of the hamlet instead of being entirely discarded by the game. Also, afflicted, stressed, and addicted characters express their agony through monologue and actions that represent their plight throughout the game. Players who choose the expeditious route become witness to the effects of the horrors they put their mercenaries through. Motives behind choosing the expeditious approach to the game reflect the player's morality and define their experience of playing *Darkest Dungeon.*

A player who chooses the expeditious route with no sympathy towards their mercenaries may be projecting their morality onto the game. Such a player essentially remains unresponsive to signs of human agony in an effort to maximize profits with minimum effort, thereby showing signs of greed. Some players may begin their engagement with the game with no intention of sacrificing mercenaries for their own progress and gain. However, when the game puts them under pressure and puts their progress in jeopardy, some players will overlook the plight of their mercenaries.

Alternately, players who take the empathetic route are eventually forced by the game to make immoral decisions if they wish to continue playing. The player may attempt to keep every mercenary healthy but, at some point the monetary cost of doing so will be impossible to cover

and the player will be forced to overlook some mercenaries' plights. In addition, the action of the game demands the violent extermination of otherworldly opponents within the various dungeons. Furthermore, any player's progress in the game may be so extremely hindered by the empathetic approach that it renders progress impossible. Consequently, the game's mechanics pressure empathetic players abandoning empathy. The irony of the game involves the fact that one *must* harm allies and kill others in order to progress. Thus, the meta-narrative regarding players' choices involving expeditious and empathetic approaches is affected by the game mechanics of *Darkest Dungeon.*

In conclusion, *Darkest Dungeon* features a linear plot and makes the plot more interactive by offering two distinct ludic options based on players' moral approaches to the game. Whether one takes the expeditious or the empathetic route, one's choices shape the emerging narrative of this game. The expeditious route involves clearing a series of dungeons as quickly as possible and letting one's employees pay the price with their physical and mental health. The "empathetic" route involves sympathizing with the mercenaries and trying to ensure their well-being throughout the game. The latter approach proves ultimately impossible when facing the final dungeons due to the increasing difficulties in the game and the overwhelmingly impossible task of keeping all mercenaries healthy. Despite the game's resistance to an empathetic approach, players who take this route have the opportunity to inject their moral disposition onto the game's narrative. As video game analyst and critic, Mark Brown notes in his video essay titled "Morality in the Mechanics," *Darkest Dungeon* aims to pressure the player into taking the immoral option. Brown notes the irony involving the fact that the game does not inform players about the repercussions of choosing a moral or immoral path, "You explore your morality organically, simply by engaging with the core mechanics on offer" (n.p.). So, what could be

considered the "narrative" of *Darkest Dungeon* is extended to a meta-narrative informed by ludic choices players make. This meta-narrative goes beyond the immediate goals of clearing dungeons and moves into realms of morality involving player interactions with the game.

Darkest Dungeon plot summary

At the start of the game, the player's avatar serves as an unseen protagonist who inherits an "Estate" from a wealthy relative called the "Ancestor." We learn that the Ancestor grew bored with running his estate while living an extravagant lifestyle, so, he started excavating dungeons and catacombs beneath the Estate. Over time, he started finding portals into dimensions which brought evil creatures into his Estate and into the world. The Ancestor believes that his excavations of the substrata beneath the Estate created the conditions necessary for the arrival of otherworldly evil beings. The Ancestor implores the player to right his wrongs by asking the player to clear a sequence of many dungeons. The player then starts recruiting mercenaries while sending them on expeditions to clear one dungeon after another. The player may choose to manage the "stress" that the mercenaries suffer as a result of facing horrors involved with purging the subterranean dungeons. Or, the player may choose to ignore the mercenaries' stress levels.

As the player sends more teams of adventurers into the dungeons, the Ancestor recounts the story of how he began excavating dungeons beneath the Estate and how evil beings began to manifest within those dungeons. The player is eventually able to send a group of adventurers into the titular Darkest Dungeon which is the source of the corruption in the Estate. At the end of that dungeon, the party encounters the spirit of the Ancestor, who is now "an Avatar of the Crawling Chaos". Players learn that they must vanquish their avatar's own ancestor in order to complete

the game. After defeating the Ancestor, the group of mercenaries must fight the "Heart of Darkness" a force of ultimate evil who is the "Progenitor of life, father and mother, alpha and omega, our creator… and our destroyer". The mercenaries may manage to defeat this foe but with a negligible chance of their entire group surviving. Following the defeat of this final evil foe, the Ancestor's spirit re-appears and reveals that the player has only managed to destroy the physical manifestation of the "Heart of Darkness," merely delaying its inevitable awakening and, ultimately, the end of the world. It is also revealed that the avatar's quest is a part of an unending cycle in the family's lineage, and that the avatar will eventually suffer the same fate as the Ancestor by becoming a force of evil known as the "Avatar of the Crawling Chaos." As the game ends, the Ancestor repeats the same words he spoke at the start of the game: "Ruin has come to our family."

CHAPTER II: BRANCHING

Before beginning the analyses of *Fallout 4* and *The Stanley Parable,* this chapter

provides a history of video games with branching narratives, revealing how, during the evolution

of video games, this narrative form moved from more traditional romance narratives to ironic

and satiric formats. During the 1990s, a major development in video game structures occurred

when developers took inspiration from tabletop role-playing games like "Dungeons & Dragons"

and started to re-shape the video game narrative patterns. They took the linear narrative formats

and rendered them more complicated by offering *multiple* choices in the avatar's progress. This

format was similar to the "Choose your own Adventure" books that were popular at the time as

well as tabletop role-playing games such as "Dungeons & Dragons." Both "Choose your own

Adventure" books and "Dungeons & Dragons" games allow audiences to assume the role of the

protagonist, and to make choices that determine that protagonist's actions as well as the outcome

to the plots. Branching video games also allow players to choose the path that their avatars

follow towards multiple possible outcomes. The following illustration provides a visual example

for branching narratives, highlights possible narrative choices, and different plot endings based

on players' choices:
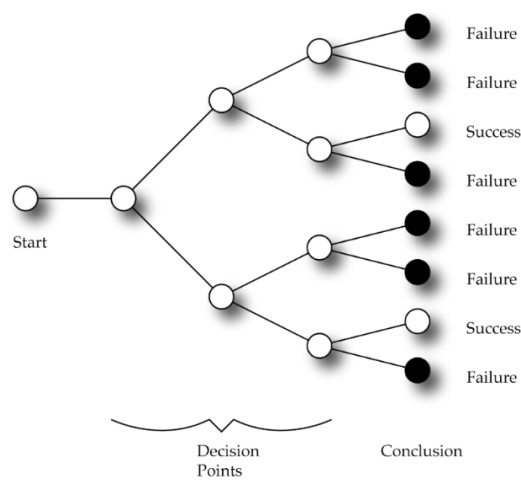
Chart by Carlton depicting basic branching narrative structures, "Exploring Interactive Narrative – Branching."

Branching plots typically begin with a single narrative path and then offer players a choice between two or more possible directions. Generally, choosing any of the available paths renders other paths out of reach. In addition, some branches might later merge with others as the avatar moves forward, providing multiple ways of reaching the same goal. While branching narratives *seem* to offer nearly endless possible choices to players, the number of branches and possible endings is always finite.

The breadth of choices in branching narrative video games attracted players who felt more directly engaged with such games. Branching narratives rose to popularity during the 1990s and have remained one of the mainstays of video gaming. Most, but not all branching games of the 1990s and early 2000s were RPGs (role-playing games) that either pursued romance quest patterns or ironic formats. Two of the more influential RPG branching narrative video games of the 1990s are *The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall* (1996), and *Baldur's Gate* (1998). Both of these games feature romance structures and quests involving the protagonist's attempts to save the country or world within a fantastic Medieval setting. Such games remediate earlier literary works, including those of J.R.R. Tolkien, notably *The Lord of Rings* trilogy, and *The Hobbit.*

In *The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall,* the protagonist is under the king's orders to rid the land of a great evil. This task fulfills what Frye defines as the "major adventure" of a romance quest. Prior to engaging with the main task of this adventure, players are faced with minor duties and secondary related tasks that do not always contribute directly to the goal of the "major adventure." These secondary quests may be considered part of the "preliminary minor adventures" that Frye identifies as being part of the first stage of any larger romance quest narrative. In the preliminary stage, players typically have more choices in the narrative path than in the later "crucial struggle" phase. In most branching video game narratives, the main action or

quest ends following the "crucial struggle," which Frye identifies as the second stage of any romance quest. *Daggerfall* offers players narrative choices in the "crucial struggle" stage. Players can continue to choose paths that will end either in the protagonist's death, or the death of the villain. The game then proceeds to narrate the conclusion of the heroic efforts of the protagonist, triggering the third romance stage: the "exaltation of the hero." Video games typically spend little time on this third stage. In pursuing the quest which results either in the death of the avatar/protagonist, or in the successful elimination of evil, the hero is commemorated briefly, and then either the game ends, or the next adventure begins.

Like other branching narrative RPGs of this period, *Daggerfall* also lets players align themselves with different factions fighting for survival and/or dominance in the game's setting. In *Daggerfall,* these factions include groups such as the Fighters Guild, Mages Guild, and Thieves Guild. These factions do not play a major role in *Daggerfall's* main plot but provide opportunities for players to choose their avatars' specialty, career, and skillset. For example, avatars can rise through the ranks of any of the three guilds, thereby defining their avatar's social status (thief, warrior, assassin, etc.) while improving their skill levels which can help towards completing the main quest.

Similar to *Daggerfall, Baldur's Gate* also follows a romance quest pattern. The protagonist in this game must try to save the land from a malevolent force. In *Baldur's Gate,* the "preliminary minor adventures" phase offers a range of narrative plotline choices, but the second "crucial struggle" phase does not. The goal of overcoming evil is paramount, and if one's avatar fails, then the player must restart the adventure if they wish to continue playing the game. If one completes the quest, the game always ends the same way; the protagonist overcomes the malevolent force, the "exaltation of the hero" stage is triggered, and the protagonist/avatar is

recognized as the savior of the land. Branching games during the early 2000s started to move away from this romantic pattern towards ironic and satiric patterns.

As previously mentioned, Frye defines any ironic quest pattern as "a parody of romance." He continues to say that a satiric pattern features "militant irony" where "moral norms are relatively clear" (208). By extension, in an interview included in the appendices in this thesis, Karl Jirgens comments that a romance plot pursues a worthy quest, while ironic or satiric forms pursue either questionable quests or worthy quests under highly questionable circumstances (n.p.).

Furthermore, satiric aspects of video games can be defined with the help of Mikhail Bakhtin and his concept of the "carnivalesque." According to Bakhtin's 1965 book, *Rabelais and His World;*

> In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators… Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants… The tradition of the Saturnalias remained unbroken and alive in the medieval carnival, which expressed this universal renewal and was vividly felt as an escape from the usual official way of life (7-8)

Bakhtin's description of the carnivalesque serves three purposes in the study of video games. First, it describes, with surprising accuracy, the experience of many video game narratives.

Players are not passive audiences of video games. Instead, as Bakhtin suggests they "live in" and participate in video game stories. Second, any video game, like any carnival is "subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom." In other words, the laws of the outside world do not necessarily translate to the principles of a video game world. Those who choose to "live in" a video game world, must behave according to the laws of the game. Third, Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque is fundamental to satiric video game narratives. Satiric or carnivalesque video games offer "an escape from the usual official way of life" and an inversion of the usual social hierarchy, a fundamental quality of any satire as previously listed according to Frye. All satiric video games feature avatar/protagonists on questionable quests, typically within questionable and/or corrupt socio-cultural environments.

The early 2000s witnessed the rise of ironic and satiric branching narrative video games that allowed players to explore more realistic sociopolitical issues within fantastic or science-fiction settings. The shift towards irony is evident in the game *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009). *Dragon Age: Origins* features a protagonist who has to save the world from a demon. While the quest of this game initially seems to follow a romance pattern, it later introduces a hierarchy of races and classes and satirizes the way certain characters are persecuted based on their racial and economic backgrounds. Players are asked to choose their avatar's identity at the beginning of the game and, based on their race and class, other characters might be dismissive, abusive, or distrusting towards the protagonist. Thus, *Dragon Age: Origins* satirizes discrimination based on race, class, and financial background.

Borderlands (2009) is another popular and fitting example of a satiric branching narrative video game. This game includes a morally questionable protagonist on an unworthy quest and offers humorous and absurdist views of typical video game pursuits and portrayals of violence.

Borderlands features a protagonist who goes on a self-serving quest to find what is called "the vault," which supposedly holds immeasurable power and wealth. The antagonist in this game's plotline is simply another character trying to be the first to reach the vault. The major struggle in this game does not involve a worthy or noble quest since both protagonist and antagonist pursue the vault for selfish financial reasons.

In addition, *Borderlands* satirizes some of the medium's most common tropes such as intense and continuous violence. The absurdity of violence in this game satirizes carnage in other video games. Enemies in *Borderlands* are all hyperbolic and overly melodramatic. For example, those who rush towards the protagonist to engage them in close-range combat are called "psychos" and act accordingly. There are also giant humanoid enemies called "goliaths" who are difficult to eliminate and, if beheaded, continue to live while flying into rages. *Borderlands* mocks extreme video game violence, and questions unjustified or unnecessary aggression in other video games. It does this through its own exaggerated and unapologetic violence with no rationalization, along with cartoonish and unrealistic visuals. The absurd and satiric treatment of violence in *Borderlands* loosely remediates earlier satiric works such as the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), directed by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones. Of note is the scene in the film featuring the duel between King Arthur and the Black Knight who after being decapitated responds by saying, "'Tis but a scratch."

In the 2010s, vastly different approaches to branching narrative video games emerged with the common feature of increasingly ironic or satiric narratives. Such narrative patterns can be seen in two very different games: *Dishonored* (2012), and *Life is Strange* (2015). These games prioritize completely different goals, but both are branching games, requiring players to

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make difficult choices for their avatars. Such choices primarily involve moral decisions in challenging situations.

Dishonored qualifies as ironic because the protagonist begins his quest for self-serving reasons. This is a stealth game in which players take the role of a royal bodyguard who is framed for the assassination of an empress and must navigate the hostile setting of the game seeking either revenge or justice. Players must make a moral decision when proceeding with the game. If one pursues the path of justice, then they have a chance to vindicate the protagonist while *attempting* to improve the lives of the common people within a corrupt socio-political framework. Alternately, if one opts to pursue revenge for its own sake, then the narrative moves into a satiric form. So, if players choose to go on a rampage while seeking to eliminate their enemies, then they contribute to the killing frenzy plaguing the city which takes the lives of many innocent people and ultimately results in the death of the protagonist/avatar. In this case, the protagonist's questionable intentions fueled by their violent actions only lead to more violence and death for everyone. Essentially, the branching format of *Dishonored* offers a moral dilemma to players that shapes the narrative of the game into either an irony or a satire.

Life is Strange is another highly influential branching video game with a satiric structure released in the 2010s. This game features the tale of a twelfth-grade student Max, who finds out that she has the power to turn back time and change the past. Her ultimate goal is to prevent a huge storm from destroying her town, but the town itself is highly corrupt, and her special powers only function sporadically. Furthermore, Max can ultimately save the town only if she sacrifices the well-being of some of her loved ones. This quest satirizes sexual predators, bullies, and larger forms of social corruption as Max attempts to navigate her way through social perils. For example, Max must try to prevent her friend from being murdered by a drug dealer, another

friend from committing suicide due to the pressures of bullies, and try to stop a schoolteacher from continually abusing and assaulting students while the school's Principal ignores such transgressions.

Furthermore, Max's ability to time-travel is imperfect. Every time she tries to change the past, an alternate reality is created. Each small change Max causes in the past results in a "butterfly" effect that brings about exponential changes in her present. For example, in one branch of the game, Max travels back in time to prevent her friend's father from dying in a car crash. This act of kindness results in an *alternate* version of reality in which her friend has been paralyzed from the neck down in a *different* car crash. Realizing that her attempted heroic action caused harm, Max goes back in time again to restore her friend's father's car crash, thereby reinstating her friend's health in the present, as well as the death of her friend's father.

The final choice facing the player in this game is highly ironic. Max can either keep her best friend alive, or save the town, but not both. The narrative of this game traces the young teen's insecurities and how she navigates the difficulties of life while calling attention to issues such as bullying, suicide, and sexual harassment. Consequently, the larger problem of rescuing the town becomes secondary to other socio-cultural issues. *Life is Strange* signifies a shift in video game storytelling towards plots that deal with contemporary socio-cultural matters. It is hard to say why branching game narratives shifted from romance structures to ironic or even satiric forms. Throughout history, art has reacted to the larger socio-economic, cultural, and political environments, and perhaps game developers have started doing the same by satirizing their own socio-cultural conditions. This is an area that could be pursued further, but the limits of this thesis do not allow a full examination of that topic area.

The following two sections in this chapter will provide analyses of *Fallout 4* and *The Stanley Parable.* These analyses will consider the development, moral conflicts, socio-political themes, and degrees of remediation of these games among other subjects. Each section will close with a full plot summary for each game.

Fallout 4

Fallout is an acclaimed series of video games that includes *Fallout: A Post Nuclear Role Playing Game* (1997)*, Fallout 2: A Post Nuclear Role Playing Game* (1998)*, Fallout 3* (2008)*, Fallout: New Vegas* (2010)*, Fallout 4* (2015)*,* and *Fallout 76* (2018)*.* The games in the *Fallout* series were among the earliest role-playing video games that set the standard for branching narratives in modern RPGs. These games allow players' avatars to traverse a post-apocalyptic world. Apart from *Fallout 76,* all *Fallout* games offer intricate branching narratives in which any player's moral or ethical approach towards elements in the game can affect the fates of several socio-political factions as well as the destinies of prominent characters. In addition, a player's choices can change the geographic and social environment that the player's avatar must traverse. These video games feature multiple branching paths that can be chosen by the player. For example, *Fallout 4* features five main narrative branches, and those can be meshed with each other, depending upon the player's choices.

All versions of *Fallout* feature a post-apocalyptic setting. If one recalls Northrop Frye's definition of satire and its qualities, then it is possible to conclude that the futuristic and post-apocalyptic settings in the first five *Fallout* video games remediate patterns of Menippean satire which typically include the following: token fantasies (the post-apocalyptic conditions), objects of attack (both institutional/socio-politics and individual/social corruption), digressions (various

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narrative branches and secondary "missions"), inverted social hierarchies (corruption leads to power), anatomies (questionable socio-political systems), parodies of archetypal heroic patterns (the avatar's questionable quest), along with humour based on absurd situations and sometimes on language play (euphemism and dysphemism used to define lethal conditions, and/or product names such as "Nuka-Cola"). Arguably, the first five *Fallout* games are Menippean satires because they all have prominent Menippean features because none of the games have either comic or tragic outcomes. If the purpose of all satire is to inspire audiences towards desirable social reform, then, the plots of these games may or may not do so, depending upon the predispositions of the players. All five of the first *Fallout* video games feature socio-cultural "anatomies" depicting what could go wrong during crisis situations. And, the aforementioned games all feature the key elements mentioned by Northrop Frye in his definition of Menippean satire, notably, a series of loosely connected and extended dialogues or debates often conducted at social gatherings in which groups of loquacious eccentrics, or representatives of various factions offer questionable or even ludicrous perspectives (309).

Due to limitations of this study, I will confine my comments to *Fallout 4* since it is the last title in the *Fallout* series that adheres closely to the original post-apocalyptic and satiric approach that popularized the series. Released in 2015, *Fallout 4* continues to adhere to its predecessors' narrative structure. It is an "action role-playing game [G]" with a branching narrative format. Much like the previous *Fallout* games, *Fallout 4* is set in a desolate landscape that has been devastated by a nuclear war. *Fallout 4* takes place in a fictional version of Boston, Massachusetts, starts right before a nuclear attack against the city, and presents a post-apocalyptic vision of the city.

The previous four *Fallout* games allow players to traverse a post-apocalyptic setting, but *Fallout 4* also allows players to investigate *pre*-apocalyptic times. In an interview conducted by Tom Hoggins titled, "Fallout 4 interview: Bethesda's Todd Howard on building the apocalypse" Todd Howard, *Fallout 4's* game director and designer comments on the game's post- *and* pre-apocalyptic settings saying that there "needs to be a prologue. It's important to us to let you experience that world, so that when you emerge from the vault you feel the sense of loss and think 'I wish this was the way it was.' Having the beginning and having the sense that stuff is all gone? That you've lost everything? That is important" (n.p.). This interview supports the notion that the developer of *Fallout 4* aimed to depict not only a satiric dystopian culture but a profound sense of loss. Hoggins notes that as the game was being designed, "Lead artist Istvan Pely never stopped drawing concepts for Fallout's heady mix of 50s Americana and hi-tech sci-fi" (n.p.). This mixture of Americana and high-technology further hints at the game's satiric direction. Hoggins shows an awareness of the odd and ironic socio-cultural mixtures in this game when he explains how the Cold War influence helped shape the game's aesthetics, "The result of that influence is a world that is part bubbly 50s suburbia (sleek saloons and bright suits), part hi-tech convenience (robot servants) and part nuclear paranoia (vaults and shelters built for the incoming doom). Paranoia that is well-founded, of course, as nuclear war lays waste to the planet" (n.p.). The image below is taken from the game and reflects the irony of a society that was simultaneously able to develop high technology including robot servants, as well as the possibility of mass mutual nuclear destruction:

A scene from *Fallout 4* provided in above-mentioned Tom Haggins interview.

As previously mentioned, the game opens in Boston in a hypothetical 2075 featuring a dynamic tension between a sense of optimism and a fear of atomic destruction. *Fallout 4* deploys a sense of post-World-War-Two paranoia. During the interview, Todd Howard comments on the game's development; "In any decade you can ask: what were their designs going to be?" He goes on to say, "I thought we drew crazy stuff but the real stuff is crazier" (n.p.). Through this comment, Howard gestures to the game's socio-political parody, which in turn points to its ironic and satiric format. By presenting the *pre*-apocalyptic setting to players, the game accentuates the dystopian circumstances of a post-nuclear strike wasteland while giving players and their avatars partial freedom to affect and change the wasteland with their decisions.

One key factor that greatly contributes to players' agency in *Fallout 4* is its open world setting. In open world games, avatars are free to explore an expansive area. Apart from the avatars' physical freedom to roam about the game's setting freely, the open world format allows players to pursue different quests and interests in any order they wish. Setting the game in an open world environment contributes greatly to the branching narrative pattern of *Fallout 4*. One

can, for example, postpone the completion of the main quest in *Fallout 4* in favor of completing secondary quests or simply exploring the game's world.

As the game progresses players are required to choose allegiance with one of the game's power factions. Players choose to follow a narrative branch indirectly, by choosing which armed faction to support. As such, any emergent narrative within *Fallout 4* bears the moral weight of the player's decision to support an ideology, as well as to eliminate the opposing factions and their ideologies. It is important to note that the protagonist of *Fallout 4* is always depicted as a human and the primary tension between the powerful factions in the game involves the rights and lives of human beings contending against sentient *synthetic* humans ("synths"). As such, the game's narrative branches pose a moral question to players: how will they treat those from another race and/or species? Will they defend the marginalized group, or will they fight for dominance while eradicating all non-humans? Such implied questions emerging from the game's branching narrative structure comment indirectly on racism and xenophobia. The manner in which the post-apocalyptic crisis emerges in this video game illuminates the types of choices that players face.

Following the explosion of a nuclear bomb, the protagonist of *Fallout 4* seeks refuge in an underground bomb shelter. The gender of the protagonist/avatar begins undetermined and must be chosen by the player. The unwitting avatar is led into a shelter and is cryogenically frozen to be preserved as a biological specimen for future study. However, the cryogenic chamber fails after over two centuries. The protagonist, called the "Sole Survivor" awakens to find their child kidnapped and their spouse murdered. The Sole Survivor then sets out to avenge the death of their spouse and to find their child. The avatar's quest for the missing son is ironic because we later learn that the boy has matured and become the leader of an oppressive and

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extremist faction. Regardless of what choices the Sole Survivor makes during their quest, many civilians in the post-apocalyptic wasteland will lose their lives due to the power struggle between opposing factions. In addition, the Sole Survivor may end up working against their own son.

The plotline of *Fallout 4* adapts or remediates stories from folklore, religion, and novels. For example, Washington Irving's 1819 short story "Rip Van Winkle" features a protagonist who falls asleep in a cave for twenty years and returns to a socially, culturally, and politically different world. Van Winkle witnesses the United Colonies prior to and following the American Revolution in the late eighteenth century. Upon his reawakening, Van Winkle passively accepts the new society and serves as a storyteller. *Fallout 4* remediates some of the key concepts in Irving's short story.

A similar story connecting Abrahamic cultures from the Middle East is of the "Seven Sleepers". According to Pieter W. van der Horst's 2015 article "Pious Long-Sleepers in Greek, Jewish, and Christian Antiquity," that story is of seven pious men who fall asleep in a cave near Ephesus and wake up some "372 years later" (1). *Fallout 4* utilizes a similar conceit to explore a hypothetical post-apocalyptic world, requiring that players make morally charged choices affecting the socio-political state of the game's world. The Seven Sleepers, Rip Van Winkle, and the Sole Survivor are different in one fundamental way. The story of the Seven Sleepers depicts individuals fleeing their city due to religious oppression. Upon reawakening and returning to the city they accept the new society and are hailed as spiritual guides. While the Seven Sleepers and Rip Van Winkle passively adopt the ways of the new world, the Sole Survivor does not necessarily do so. Instead, *Fallout 4's* Sole Survivor enters situations in which conflict is inevitable and dubious moral choices must be made.

During their quest to save their missing son, the Sole Survivor encounters several morally

questionable armed factions. At multiple junctures, players must choose to help or work against

some of these factions. While the main quest for the Sole Survivor remains the same for the

majority of the game, a player's interactions with these factions may result in significant changes

in the outcome of the plot. *Fallout 4* allows players to directly affect several elements of the

narrative including the fate of the factions, chances of survival for the denizens of the wasteland,

and the outcome of the main quest itself. Given how players can affect the plot in *Fallout 4*, the

game offers a branching narrative pattern that deals with themes of war, greed, violence, the

moral repercussions of artificial intelligence or android sentience involving the socio-political

rights of synths. As such, this video game echoes earlier literary works such as Asimov's *I,*

Robot (1950), which provides a look at humanity by examining the implications of androids

becoming self-aware and whether or not such beings deserve the same rights as humans. By

examining human reactions to other sentient species, *I, Robot* and *Fallout 4* satirize issues such

as xenophobia and racism which remain prevalent in global and U.S. culture.

A further remediation that is evident in *Fallout 4* involves the Arthurian legend of the

"Fisher King" which is also referenced in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land.* While the post-

apocalyptic conditions in *Fallout 4* may have some affinities with the idea of a "waste land", the

parallels with Eliot's poem are questionable. However, parallels to the story of the Fisher King

are evident. According to Chrétien de Troyes's poem, written in the late 12th century titled

Perceval, the Story of the Grail, the Fisher King was a maimed sovereign, the last in the line of

kings who were entrusted with the Holy Grail, awaiting the arrival of a knight who could be

entrusted with the Grail and who could heal the king (3510-3560). *Fallout 4* recreates a similar

situation with one significant addition involving freedom of choice for the audience. When

players first meet Shaun, the Sole Survivor's son, he reveals that he is deathly ill and that he is the leader of the Institute and potentially the most powerful person in the wasteland. Shaun holds this station because he is in possession of technologies powerful enough to be considered "the Holy Grail" in this post-apocalyptic world. Those who control high technology can readily gain and maintain power. Hence, the perception that technology can serve as a "Holy Grail" indicates the misguided or questionable quest of this satiric video game. Instead of pursuing spiritual enlightenment, the characters are in pursuit of technology which leads to an ability to gain power and dominate others.

Shaun as the "maimed king" of the wasteland patiently awaits the arrival of the Sole Survivor for two reasons that mirror those of the Fisher King story. Towards the final stages of the game, Shaun is hoping to relinquish the control of the Institute's technological Holy Grail to the Sole Survivor. In addition, he seeks "healing" but in this case it is an emotional and psychological healing instead of a physical one. Shaun wishes to experience the peace and bliss of having a family before his death. Upon meeting Shaun, the player can either join his Institute or battle against it. By giving players the freedom of choice to either join or fight against the Institute, *Fallout 4* lets players to engage with the morality of the final outcome involving the Institute's technological Holy Grail.

It is significant that no matter which path the player chooses, the desired technology has lost the spiritual status of "the Holy Grail." Instead of focusing its narrative on the powerful members of the society, the game focuses on the price that regular people have to pay for pursuing a questionable object of desire. As such, the struggle for justice and the battle against social injustice that arises from the pursuit of prosperity and territory becomes the main dynamic tension in the narrative of *Fallout 4.*

The emergent narrative of *Fallout 4* revolves around the newly sentient synths and features a clash between four prominent armed factions. The first faction is the Institute which is directed by the Sole Survivor's son and largely operates from an underground and hidden base. The Institute is technologically advanced and cares only for the survival and well-being of humans. This group terrorizes people across the wasteland by kidnapping and replacing them with "synths" or synthetic humans who are generally indistinguishable from their organic counterparts. The Institute uses synths as slaves and denies that they have self-awareness and therefore should have the same rights as humans. Members of the Institute consider morality an obstacle in the way of human survival and technological advancement. All other factions in the wasteland oppose the Institute's tendencies towards racial purism and exclusionary hoarding of technology. A second power group in this game is the Brotherhood of Steel. This group is a quasi-religious paramilitary order operating across the ruins of North America in search of wider territory and pre-apocalyptic technology. The Brotherhood of Steel is another purist faction that seeks to destroy all non-human denizens of the wasteland including synths in order to preserve the realm for humans. The third power group is the Railroad which consists of a group of synths who have escaped from their creators at the Institute. Members of the Railroad work with the intention of freeing all other synths from their creator-slavers. These synthetic humans display self-awareness and individuality and believe in the right to freedom. The Railroad members believe that all synths deserve to live free of enslavement and to have the same rights as humans. Given that the Brotherhood of Steel and the Institute seek the destruction and enslavement of non-humans or synths, protagonists who join the Railroad are asked to fight against the other two factions. The fourth faction, known as the Minutemen, has altruistic intentions and seeks to provide safety for *all* beings in the wasteland. The Minutemen do not discriminate against synths

and will provide shelter for them in their outposts, but do not actively fight for their freedom either. This faction can choose to coexist peacefully with all other factions but not the Institute which wishes to dominate all. The Institute, the Brotherhood of Steel, the Railroad, and the Minutemen make up the four major socio-political and military factions in *Fallout 4*. The core moral predicament of this game revolves around synths gaining self-awareness and demanding to have the same rights as humans, a movement resembling other movements by various marginalized groups notably in the U.S.A.

In short, there are five paths available to players regarding the future of synths. If one joins the Institute or the Brotherhood of Steel, one must destroy and possibly enslave synths to complete the game. If one joins the Railroad, then they must fight against both the Institute and the Brotherhood of Steel to liberate synths from their creator/slavers and to ensure their safety. If one chooses the Minutemen as their ally, then they must destroy the Institute while reserving the option to destroy the Brotherhood of Steel as well, or to leave them be.

No matter which path players decide to take, the game does not favour one type of choice over another. Instead, the game merely shows the player the wasteland changing according to the chosen faction's ideology. This is significant because, unlike games such as *Darkest Dungeon, Fallout 4* does not present a black-and-white sense of morality. In *Darkest Dungeon,* the impacts of the player's immoral decisions can be seen as tangible afflictions and mental conditions that affect the gameplay negatively. Thus, one assumes the player knows that their actions are immoral. The ethical question of that game is whether the player has or shows empathy. However, in *Fallout 4*, the game itself does not react negatively if a player chooses the Institute or the Brotherhood of Steel as an ally. As such, *Fallout 4* functions well as a mirror for the player's ethics since it does not impose any moral judgement. Instead, the game only creates a

situation and gives the player multiple choices without signaling to them that some choices are more ethical than others. In an article within *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* titled, "Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin comments on how literary works, and I will argue by extension, video games can help liberate marginalized or alternate voices. If a player chooses to show empathy towards the marginalized synths, then, the game's narrative results in a liberation. However, players may instead choose to oppress the synths in order to advance the interests of their chosen faction, then the satiric aspects of this game become more pronounced. In the latter case, an inversion of social values is implied when spiritual pursuits are displaced by a question for the technological Holy Grail. As demonstrated earlier in this thesis, such an inversion is typical of what Bakhtin calls the "carnivalesque" in *Rabelais and His World* (7-8). As discussed earlier, this inversion contributes greatly to the satiric aspects of *Fallout 4's* narrative. In this game, players experience what might be called a carnival of death, and their choices affect the narrative and satiric aspects of the game.

For example, in a forum dedicated to *Fallout 4* in the discussion website *Reddit,* a player/commentator named InvisibleChip writes that, in their opinion, "the Institute's advances in hydroponics and synthetic animals and even Synths (if they advanced far enough to incorporate genetic diversity and the ability to reproduce) would have been humanity's best assets in its quest to not only survive in the wasteland but to thrive" (n.p.). InvisibleChip continues to say, "I agree wholeheartedly with the Institute's ideals" (n.p.). For InvisibleChip, the outcome of their allegiance to the Institute does not seem unethical even though the Institute is a force of evil in the game. In *Fallout 4,* players such as InvisibleChip simply *share* the Institute's vision for humanity's future. Where another player might deem it immoral to ignore the plight of synths, InvisibleChip views synths as "humanity's best assets," tools to be owned by humans and used

for human prosperity, even if synths have the capability to think, feel, and reproduce on their own. A search reveals that many players share the same ethics and values as InvisibleChip.

According to the "Global Gameplay Stats: Fallout 4" page on the *Steam* website, among millions of people who played *Fallout 4* on their computers through the *Steam* platform, only 30.1% completed the game, less than one third of whom chose the Railroad or the Minutemen as their allies (n.p.). This means that of people who completed *Fallout 4,* a majority remained sympathetic towards the questionable morals of the Brotherhood of Steel and/or the Institute both of which practice an apartheid system that dominates others. Given that these global statistics are available to the public, further ethical and sociological research may be done on this game. However, as there is neither enough time nor space to do so here, I will confine the remainder of this section to examining a brief example of possible moral dispositions that may influence players to support certain factions in the game.

To summarize, players who choose the Brotherhood of Steel or the Institute as their allies must actively decide to show little to no tolerance towards any synth or creature who is different from humans. Regardless of the player's ethics and whether they can identify the immoral aspects of their decisions or not, the character who chooses to ally with the Brotherhood of Steel or the Institute becomes an instrument of hate, dehumanization, and genocide. Generally, there are three possible reasons why a player would join one of these two factions. First, they might do so by accident, a possible scenario that leaves no room for analysis due to the player's lack of intention. Second, the player may count the results of such immoral actions as collateral damage and believe that they are working for the wasteland's greater good. This utilitarian approach to ethics might prove beneficial for a select few of humans, but ultimately contributes to the irony of *Fallout 4* by breeding hate and violence against synths. Third, the player might, like

InvisibleChip, consciously agree with the ideals of either of these two factions. In this case, the player does not even attempt to justify their actions towards synths. In fact, they might not even believe that their actions are immoral. In this case, the utter lack of empathy towards sentient synths who interact with the Sole Survivor like any human character in the game may indicate a possible affinity for intolerant beliefs such as xenophobia. It must be mentioned that it is illogical to draw a direct line between choosing the Institute or the Brotherhood of Steel in a video game and being a racist or xenophobic person in life. Any players' eagerness to antagonize or dehumanize others even in a video game based on an "us vs. them" mentality is potentially alarming. However, regardless of which faction one joins in this game including the altruistic Minutemen, or the Railroad freedom fighters, one must still engage in extreme violence resulting in the mass murder.

In conclusion, *Fallout 4* satirizes violence, extremism, and greed for power by situating the narrative in a setting where *any* decision results in the mass deaths of others. If one joins the Brotherhood of Steel or the Institute, then they become part of a larger social problem and can be identified as one of this satire's objects of attack. However, even if the player chooses to join the Railroad or the Minutemen and fight for the rights of underrepresented, marginalized, and/or enslaved people, they still must commit horrific acts of violence. The Institute can only be destroyed by detonating their nuclear reactors, an act which adds to the irony of the game by turning the Sole Survivor, a victim of a nuclear apocalypse, into a harbinger of the next nuclear disaster. Thus, even if the Sole Survivor sacrifices personal gain in favor of making the wasteland a safer and more accepting place for all of its denizens, countless innocent individuals will lose their lives and the wasteland remains a dystopian hellscape. For those who wish a more

detailed summary of the various possible narrative branches in *Fallout 4,* a summary and a chart are provided immediately below.

Fallout 4 Plot

The game begins in 2077 in Sanctuary Hills, a fictional location near Concord, Massachusetts. Players can choose to play as Nate, a former soldier of the U.S. Army, or Nora, Nate's wife, who is a lawyer. Players begin the game as their chosen avatar at home with their spouse and their infant son, Shaun. Soon, a representative of Vault-Tec, a company that has been building a vast network of bomb and research shelters, admits the family into Vault 111, the local fallout shelter. Moments later, a nuclear war is declared on the U.S.A. as nuclear explosions devastate the town. The family hurries to Vault 111 where they are instructed to enter cryogenic tubes for medical purposes. After an unknown period of time spent frozen in the tube, they are awakened by two strangers who attempt to take Shaun from the protagonist's spouse. When the spouse resists, they murder them and kidnap Shaun. The game is not gender-specific at this point. The protagonist is put back into cryogenic sleep and reawakens an unknown period of time later. The protagonist, now known as the "Sole Survivor" of Vault 111, sets out looking for their missing son.

The Sole Survivor heads home to find Sanctuary Hills in ruins. There, they find out that they spent 210 years in Vault 111. Soon, they meet and help a group of armed civilians, called the Commonwealth Minutemen. The Minutemen are one of the four major factions in the game. They employ the help of the Sole Survivor to assist civilians throughout the wasteland find safe settlements scattered around the remains of Boston.

The Sole Survivor then travels to Diamond City, a fortified and relatively safe settlement built in the ruins of Fenway Park, an actual baseball park located in Boston. There, the Sole Survivor hears of an organization called the Institute which is terrifying people across commonwealth by kidnapping them and replacing them with "synths", synthetic humans who are generally indistinguishable from their organic counterparts. While investigating those kidnappings, the Sole Survivor uncovers the identity of their son's kidnapper, Conrad Kellogg, an agent working for The Institute. The Sole Survivor finds Kellogg who tells them that Shaun is being held in The Institute. The Sole Survivor then kills Kellogg and retrieves a cybernetic implant from his brain that allows access to Kellogg's memories. The memories reveal that The Institute uses a teleportation device to move agents, like Kellogg, in and out of the underground premises freely, without the risk of compromising the location of their underground base. The Sole Survivor finds the blueprint needed to build a similar teleportation device capable of transporting into the Institute. By this time, the Sole Survivor has encountered the Railroad, another one of the major factions in *Fallout 4.* The Railroad consists of a group of synths who seek freedom and who have escaped from their creators at the Institute.

By this time, the Sole Survivor has also encountered the Brotherhood of Steel, the quasi-religious military order that operates across the post-apocalyptic ruins of North America seeking to destroy all non-human denizens in the wasteland. At this stage of the game, the Sole Survivor must choose to ally themselves with the Brotherhood of Steel, the Railroad, or the Minutemen to gain the necessary resources to build the teleportation device in order to gain entry into the Institute.

Following a series of missions on behalf of one of their chosen allies, the Sole Survivor will gain the necessary materials to build the teleportation device which permits successful entry

into the Institute. The Sole Survivor will find their ten-year-old son, Shaun in a glass room. But Shaun does not recognize them and instead, panics. The Sole Survivor then finds out that the child is a prototype synth and that the actual Shaun is, in fact, the Institute's director, commonly known as "Father." Shaun, now an old man, reveals that he was kidnapped by Kellogg to be used as an uncontaminated, pre-war specimen to be used for the newer models of synths that were being developed by the Institute. It turns out that the Sole Survivor spent sixty years in cryogenic stasis after the son was taken. Shaun, hoping to reunite with his parent and to have a family, invites the Sole Survivor to join The Institute. If Shaun's invitation is accepted, then Shaun reveals that he is dying of cancer and wishes for the Sole Survivor to become his successor and lead the Institute in an effort to take over the wasteland. If the Sole Survivor joins the Institute, then this will initiate a purge in the wasteland which will wipe out the Brotherhood of Steel and the Railroad. The Sole Survivor then assumes control of The Institute after Shaun's death.

On the other hand, if the Sole Survivor rejects Shaun's offer to join the Institute, then they leave the premises and begin devising a plan with their preferred faction to fight the Institute. Regardless which ally is chosen, the Sole Survivor will gain access to The Institute during a final assault. There, they talk to Shaun one last time on his deathbed before departing. While exiting the Sole Survivor ensures the destruction of the Institute by detonating a nuclear reactor. Upon exiting The Institute, the Sole Survivor once again meets the ten-year-old synth Shaun, who recognizes his parent. The Sole Survivor can choose to take the child with them or leave him to die. Upon rescuing the child, it is revealed that before his death, the real Shaun reprogrammed synth Shaun to recognize the Sole Survivor as his parent, with the hope of giving synth Shaun the life and family he never had. The many possible endings to this video depending upon which narrative branches a player chooses to take.

War Never Changes

Out of Time

When Freedom Calls (can be skipped by going directly to Diamond City) → Unlocks Minutemen side/radiant quests

Following quests can be put off → Taking Independence (after 4 settlements) → Old Guns (starts few days later)

Not part of main quest line, but may want to do this now or it will become unavailable later ← The Memory Den ← Jewel of the Commonwealth

Unlikely Valentine

Getting a Clue

Fire Support ← Following quests can be put off ← Reveille (if BoS quests not started) ← Reunions

Call to Arms

Dangerous Minds

Semper Invicta

The Glowing Sea

Cleansing the Commonwealth & Quartermastery (1 of each)

Hunter/Hunted

The Lost Patrol (could have started earlier, but best done with Danse) → Shadow of Steel → Unlocks most BoS Radiant quests

The Molecular Level (see Tradecraft note) → Road to Freedom (done w/ Molecular Level) → Tradecraft (do before visiting Institute to join Railroad, but doing so will conflict with some Institute side quests!) → Most side/radiant quests unavailable until after visiting The Institute.

Unlocks "Leading by Example" (radiant) ← Duty or Dishonor

Tour of Duty

Show No Mercy

Quests below may only start depending on progress with that faction or who built relay.

From Within | Institutionalized | Underground Undercover | Inside Job

A Loose End (if both Duty... and Liberty... complete)

Outside the Wire

Liberty Reprimed

Unlocks side/radiant quests. Building a Better Crop should be done ASAP or is unavailable.

Reach required point in Institute quest line without blowing cover.

Blow cover with Institute.

Make Institute hostile

Blind Betrayal

Synth Retention

Institute hostile! → Burning Cover → Railroad Failure

Banished from the Institute (unavailable if doing Railroad quest line)

As soon as this starts, Railroad radiant quests will be unavailable unless you make BoS hostile. Speaking to Kells at this point will make Railroad hostile!

Tactical Thinking

The Battle of Bunker Hill

Institute hostile!

Form Ranks (skipped if 8+ settlements)

Spoils of War

Mankind-Redefined (fails Tradecraft if not done)

Precipice of War

Defend the Castle

Institute hostile!

Mass Fusion

Rockets' Red Glare

The Nuclear Option

Ad Victoriam

Warn BoS | Don't warn

The Nuclear Option

With Our Powers Combined

The Nuclear Option

BoS Hostile!

Railroad Ending

Minutemen Ending

A New Dawn

Pinned

BoS Ending

Help Minutemen | Persuade/kill Minutemen

Legend
Main Quest
Minutemen Quest
BoS Quest
Railroad Quest
Institute Quest
Choice
Important note

Institute hostile!

Powering Up

Institute Failure

End of the Line

Don't warn | Warn Railroad or talk to Z1-14 (if working for Railroad already)

Railroad hostile!

Airship Down (skipped if BoS already destroyed)

Nuclear Family

Institute Ending

Fallout 4 narrative branch chart by Anthony Dotson, "Fallout 4 Quest Flowchart"

The Stanley Parable

Published in 2013, *The Stanley Parable* is a first-person "walking simulator [G]" video game with a branching narrative structure developed by Davey Wreden and William Pugh. This game satirizes conditions of employment in hierarchical corporations. It also mocks narrative choices in branching video games. The game offers players nineteen narrative branches, each culminating in a distinctly ironic ending. According to an interview with Wreden conducted by Jeff Mattas, titled "Interview: The Stanley Parable developer Davey Wreden," published in the game news website *Shack News*, *The Stanley Parable* was first developed by Wreden as a free mod for another video game, *Half-Life 2,* and was inspired by games such as *Bioshock* (2007) and *Portal* (2007) (n.p.). In another interview conducted by Robert Yang published in the website *Rock Paper Shotgun*, titled "Level with me, Davey Wreden," Wreden states that, after the success of the modification, he joined with another developer, William Pugh, and turned the modification into a standalone game (n.p.). The game was published through the now discontinued "Steam Greenlight" system which allowed players to choose their favorite indie game to be published on Steam, one of the most prominent digital game distribution platforms for personal computers (The Stanley Parable, *Steamcommunity,* n.p.).

The Stanley Parable does not offer any combat or action elements. It primarily involves the player exploring narrative options by guiding Stanley, the protagonist and avatar, through the interior of an office building on a day when the corporate's managerial hierarchy is mysteriously absent. Players' decisions mostly involve Stanley either seeking a boss or a way out by choosing various doors and/or hallways. Meantime, a disembodied voice named "the Narrator" recommends Stanley's next choices. Players are free to either follow the Narrator's recommendations or act against them. Each time the player makes any decision in the game, they

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move closer to one of the nineteen possible endings to the story. But none of those endings provides a satisfactory resolution. Features like simple game mechanics, limited choices, minimal setting, and a relatively short "playthrough [G]" length for each narrative branch in *The Stanley Parable* allow players to realistically experience all nineteen available endings within several hours.

    The Stanley Parable parodies branching video games that feature win/lose conditions by including ludicrous moments where the Narrator tells the player that they won the game and immediately contradicts himself before the game restarts and Stanley is returned to his inescapable situation. *The Stanley Parable* features no satisfactory resolution and no possible win/lose scenarios. This video game explores an existential crisis on a metatextual level by engaging the player in an unwinnable game. In doing so, this game satirizes the fundamental qualities of video game narratives.

    During the course of Stanley's quest, the Narrator constantly interrupts player decisions and reverses expected results. These reversals are a sign of what Bakhtin would call the carnivalesque. The reversal of power is an identifying feature of the carnivalesque that allows the game to explore themes such as freedom of choice. In *Rabelais and His World,* Bakhtin comments on the history of the carnivalesque in literary works. Bakhtin notes that carnivalesque situation typically feature a character who is fooled by existing conditions:

> Clowns and fools, which often figure in Rabelais's novel, are characteristic of the medieval culture of humor. They were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season. Like Triboulet at the time of Francis I, they were not actors playing their parts on a stage, as did the comic actors of a later period, impersonating Harlequin, Hanswurst, etc., but remained fools and clowns always and wherever they made their appearance. As such they represented a certain

form of life, which was real and ideal at the same time. They stood on the borderline

between life and art, in a peculiar midzone as it were, they were neither eccentrics nor

dolts, neither were they comic actors (8).

Stanley represents a fool situated on the "borderline between life and art". In this case, that

borderline is defined by the fictive realm of the game and its artistry, while the avatar is guided

by a living person. Stanley is an avatar, in a "peculiar midzone" serving neither as dolt nor comic

actor. Stanley appears to be an average worker, who is not a comedian, but his ironic situation is

laughable. The situation is absurd and serves to satirize potential failures in corporate

hierarchies. Stanley faces an existential crisis wherein his life appears to be scripted in a way that

prevents arrival at any desirable resolution moving this video game to a metatextual satiric level.

In these peculiar ways, *The Stanley Parable* displays carnivalesque qualities.

On a metatextual level, *The Stanley Parable* mocks the traditional relationship between

video games and their players by engaging the Narrator in thwarting the possibility of any

desirable resolution. Regardless of which doorway or hallway the player chooses for Stanley, he

can never escape his situation, and is always returned to his office and the game restarts, thereby

further contributing to the carnivalesque quality of this satiric video game. In *Rabelais and His*

World, Bakhtin comments further on this topic: **"**Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they

live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival

lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the

laws of its own freedom" (7-8). On a metatextual level *The Stanley Parable* engages "all the people"

because anyone can choose to be a player. Significantly, in this video game Stanley is not allowed

outside of his corporation's building. As such the game establishes its own carnivalesque time and

space which is "subject only to its laws" or the skewed rules of the game. And the idea of "freedom"

is satirized in at least two ways; a) because players have freedom of choice, but those choices never

arrive at a desirable resolution, and b) there is no escape from the corporation's building and therefore a player cannot find freedom for the avatar Stanley. Moreover, Stanley's unenviable situation can be interpreted as parallel to that of the average office worker, who is part of a corporate hierarchical structure. On a metatextual level the game *alludes* to the notion that we *might* be living in a simulation that undermines attempts to reach our goals. As avatar, Stanley serves as an "everyman" who represents the plight of workers who might feel entrapped in corporate jobs. For any player the only escape from *The Stanley Parable* is to quit the game.

On another metatextual level, one can consider the "achievement" feature externally linked to *The Stanley Parable* provided by the *Steam* "achievement" system which rewards players with "badges" for completing certain tasks in video games. One of the achievements in *The Stanley Parable,* titled "Go Outside," can only be gained if one does *not* play the game for *five* actual years ("Global Gameplay Stats: The Stanley Parable" n.p.). Though this achievement, the game designers of *The Stanley Parable* satirize players' engagements with their own video game. In many of its narrative branches, *The Stanley Parable* clearly conveys that the only way out of its narrative loop is for the player to quit playing the game. The "Go Outside" achievement supports the game's sentiment on how futile it is to keep playing while expecting to win. The "Go Outside" is inherently antithetical to the purpose of the achievement system, which otherwise provides further incentive for players to continue engaging with games in hopes of being rewarded. The irony of this achievement enhances the satiric qualities of *The Stanley Parable.*

Other available achievements in *The Stanley Parable* parody the system as well. For example, the "Unachievable" achievement is *randomly* given to some players without explanation or reason. This arbitrary award is impossible to achieve except by chance. Another example is the "Commitment" achievement which is attainable if one plays the game for the

entire duration of any Tuesday. Neither of these two achievements help keep players engaged with *The Stanley Parable* for an extended duration. Instead, they help this game establish itself as an absurdist narrative experience that parodies and satirizes the normal tropes of its own medium. A brief look at how the narrative branches of this game are constructed helps further clarify *The Stanley Parable's* satiric and absurdist aspects.

The story starts with a description of Stanley, a man who has a simple job at a corporation. As part of his job, he is told through a computer monitor to push certain buttons on a keyboard. The game begins with Stanley sitting in his office waiting for the day's orders which never come. Stanley is left alone and without orders from his superiors. The Narrator then starts predicting or attempting to predict players' choices by declaring that Stanley, feeling confused due to the lack of orders, "got up from his desk, and stepped out of his office." Should the player ignore the Narrator and instead choose to remain in the office while shutting the office door, then they reach the "Coward Ending" (discussed in detail later). Conversely, if the Stanley leaves the office, he finds out that the entire office building is empty and gets one step closer to the other eighteen endings in this branching narrative video game.

In *The Stanley Parable*, there are no main or secondary quests, no expansive areas to explore freely, and no characters for the silent protagonist to converse with. Ultimately, Stanley proves to be unable to escape his office building. The game's satiric qualities are enhanced each time Stanley finishes a narrative branch with Stanley transported back to his office where the game restarts. This game's ironic and satiric aspects are also enhanced by the absence of win or lose conditions. The absence of win or lose mechanics help create the core dynamic tension which is between Stanley and the Narrator as players are free to either heed the Narrator's advice or act differently without fear of failure. Regardless of the player's choices, each combination of

decisions leads to a different ending to one of the game's narrative branches. However, no matter which ending a player reaches, the narrative of *The Stanley Parable* remains ironic because Stanley's attempts at escaping the office building always prove to be futile. The branching choices facing Stanley and the player lead to no resolution to the dynamic tension within the narrative, and both the Narrator and Stanley are stuck in an infinite loop with no way out. The questionable nature of Stanley's quest and the utter lack of gain for him throughout the game helps identify *The Stanley Parable'*s structure as ironic and satiric.

As previously established in reference to Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism,* satire is a sub-set of irony and includes the following elements: 1. token fantasy (a game world where time is fluid and the player and protagonist may both be addressed), 2. individual and institutional objects of attack (Stanley's naivety in trusting corporate authority, the Narrator's mischievous misdirection, and the failure of the corporate hierarchy), 3. digression (multiple narrative branches, none of which permit escape), 4. inversion of social hierarchy (absent bosses, Stanley is self-determining), 5. anatomy (of corporate hierarchy and video game precepts). *The Stanley Parable* critiques branching video games' uses of limited choices to trick players into feeling like they have control over the game's narratives. In doing so, and by blurring the line between Stanley and the player, *The Stanley Parable* satirizes free will within video game narratives. This game permits no exit for Stanley. The concept of no exit is a remediation that can be found in previous works of satiric literature.

The Stanley Parable echoes Jean-Paul Sartre's 1944 existentialist play, *No Exit.* In that play, three characters find themselves in hell which, unexpectedly, is just a simple room. Their room is akin to Stanley's office. After some time, they realize that they are each other's tormentors and theorize that they hold the key to each other's salvations as well. Whether true or

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not, the characters come to believe that they can truly leave the room only if they decide to cooperate and show compassion to one another. However, it is implied that they will never help each other and, therefore, will never leave the room. Their situation parallels that of Stanley and the Narrator. *The Stanley Parable,* like *No Exit* deals with themes of determinism and free will.

Similar to *No Exit,* the protagonist of *The Stanley Parable* is situated in an ordinary-looking office building from which there is no escape. Stanley is accompanied by the Narrator who often taunts and harasses Stanley and is occasionally saddened or annoyed by Stanley's actions. The Narrator often acts as a tormenter. In some of the narrative branches, the Narrator even implies that Stanley is actually dead and that his existence in the office building is some sort of a never-ending punishment. Furthermore, many of the rules/premises of hell in *No Exit* are mirrored in *The Stanley Parable*. For example, characters in the play cannot be physically hurt. Similarly, Stanley falls or is crushed to his death in multiple branches, yet each time such a thing happens he is returned to his office unscathed and the game restarts. The room in the play and the office building in the game share key features. Both *look* like conventional spaces and have doors, hallways, etc., however there is no "outside" to either of them. Characters in Sartre's *No Exit* discover that they cannot leave their room. Players eventually discover that Stanley cannot leave the building. This inescapability becomes evident when one traces each of the nineteen narrative branches in *The Stanley Parable.*

In the following section I will consider five representative branches, which demonstrate how *The Stanley Parable* explores four *key concepts* including 1) freedom of choice, 2) parody of video game precepts, 3) self-parody, and 4) ergodics. First, I will analyze the "Coward Ending" to demonstrate how the game limits freedom of choice. Second, by analyzing both the "Freedom Ending" *and* the "Explosion Ending," I will demonstrate how the game satirizes

branching video games precepts. Thirdly, by considering the "Confusion Ending" one can see how the game engages in self-parody. Fourthly, the game's ergodic qualities can be revealed through the "Escape Pod Ending."

When considering the concept of freedom of choice, The Coward Ending is revealing. This ending is the easiest and involves the shortest narrative branch in *The Stanley Parable.* The first available choice in *The Stanley Parable* involves either leaving the office or closing the door. This choice aligns with a latter part of *No Exit* where the three characters learn that they may choose to leave their room through an open door. However, their reaction to this discovery is one of fear and dismay as they believe that the endless hallways and rooms beyond are more insufferable than their current room. Ultimately, they decide not to leave the room. Similarly, in the Coward Ending Stanley remains in his office room. Even if Stanley leaves his office room to track alternate narrative branches, they will all bring the same result. Stanley will be returned to his office and the game will restart. So, while freedom of choice *appears* to be a feature of the game, in fact, all choices bring the same result. By providing choices that are ultimately absurd and inconsequential the game satirizes purported freedom of choice in any video game.

The Freedom Ending effectively reveals how *The Stanley Parable* parodies video game precepts. If one exclusively follows the Narrator's directions, then Stanley will exit his office, and will eventually reach a "mind control facility". The Narrator then describes Stanley's supposed "epiphany" upon arrival. Then, the Narrator explains that Stanley and all of his co-workers were monitored and controlled by the corporation they worked for through this mind control facility. The Narrator then directs Stanley towards a panel with two buttons: "ON" and "OFF". The Narrator describes Stanley's inner feelings towards the facility, noting that Stanley wants to destroy the mind control facility to set himself free. If the player chooses to push the

"OFF" button, then the facility shuts down. At that point, Stanley finds himself in front of a big door slowly opening to the serene greenery of the outside world while the Narrator explains Stanley's feelings of triumph and freedom. Once the door is open, players can direct Stanley outside towards his freedom. Ironically, upon stepping outside, the game seizes control of Stanley and the player loses agency. Stanley is immediately transported back to his office and the game restarts. After being transported back to his office, Stanley is faced with the same choices he had before. The game remains unchanged and does not acknowledge the false "escape" from the office building. Neither the Freedom Ending branch, nor any of the other branches result in a desirable resolution to Stanley's quest. Instead, they exist as part of an inescapable loop which is directly and frequently referred to by the Narrator. As such, the so-called Freedom Ending functions as a satiric parody of players' freedom of choice because even if one follows all of the directions provided by the Narrator, one still ends up in the same dilemma. If, upon reaching the mind control facility, the player chooses to have Stanley press the "ON" button, then the results are explosive but ultimately, bring Stanley back to his original office.

Similar to the Freedom Ending, the Explosion Ending further parodies branching video game precepts. Players can reach the Explosion Ending, by slightly adjusting the decisions they made to reach the Freedom Ending. Upon reaching the "mind control facility," players can attempt to seize control over the entire facility by pushing the "ON" button instead of the "OFF" button. Upon pushing the "ON" button, the Narrator accuses Stanley of inhumane greed for power and commences a countdown leading to the explosion of the entire building. The Narrator then proceeds to mock and taunt Stanley as Stanley tries to escape the facility in hopes of avoiding the explosion. Escaping the explosion in this branch is impossible. The Narrator continues his taunts, saying that he will enjoy Stanley's suffering when the facility explodes. The

timer then runs out and right before the explosion, the game restarts, and as always, Stanley is transported back to his office.

The Explosion Ending satirizes video game precepts involving *purported* freedom of choice. Comparing the Explosion Ending to the Freedom Ending reveals *The Stanley Parable's* ironic attitude towards player choices. It is ironic that players get to choose between absolute power and ultimate freedom only when they heed all of the Narrator's directions before making a final decision involving an "ON" or "OFF" button. This game limits players' freedom of choice. Regardless of *any* decisions made by a player, the ending is always the same. In this way, *The Stanley Parable* satirizes *apparent* freedom of choice in video games.

The Confusion Ending is useful for revealing how the game parodies itself. To reach this ending, players must generally ignore the Narrator's directions until Stanley reaches a place called the "Maintenance Room" where he rides an elevator downward. At this point, the Narrator loses track of where Stanley is supposed to go next and blames Stanley's "unpredictable" choices for the destruction of the game's structure before restarting the game. The Narrator then attempts to regain control by inserting bold yellow path lines, called "The Stanley Parable Adventure Line™" for Stanley to follow. However, these lines eventually prove ineffective often leading nowhere and, after the Narrator restarts the game multiple times, Stanley reaches a room containing a full "schedule" for the Confusion Ending which maps out every decision and step leading to this particular conclusion. The Narrator, who is *not* aware of this room's existence, then expresses his surprise that as narrator he has been pre-scripted and is merely acting out a written plan without agency even though he *thought* he was the mastermind of Stanley's story. Here the game parodies the character of the Narrator as well as itself by showing how game designers can include the design process as an element of the game. In this ending, the Narrator

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then proceeds to restart the game in defiance of the recently revealed and pre-scripted schedule. Once again, Stanley is transported back to his office and the game restarts.

The Confusion Ending shows that the Narrator is not the all-powerful personification of the game as he apparently imagines himself to be. The game parodies itself by treating the Narrator as a character and then addressing his limitations (e.g.; putting him in locations he is unaware of). In order to better grasp the self-parody of *The Stanley Parable* it helps to recall that video games are created by teams of designers. As such, any narrator in a video game represents a carefully pre-scripted narrative devised by a team. By pointing out the Narrator's lack of power to make *independent* decisions, even though he claims to be the architect of Stanley's story, the game self-reflexively reveals the design team's satiric sense of humour.

Lastly, the Escape Pod Ending is useful for revealing the ergodic qualities of *The Stanley Parable*. In this narrative branch, Stanley accidentally disables the Narrator and is free to explore the open rooms in the office building. Stanley then finds a staircase that leads to an "escape pod" which could help him leave the building. However, he never gains access to the pod because doing so requires the consent of both Stanley *and* the Narrator, who has been disabled and is absent during this ending. The Escape Pod Ending gestures to the interactivity between game players and game designers. In this scenario, Stanley can only escape the building if he receives consent from the Narrator. However, Stanley cannot reach his escape location without disabling the Narrator. The ironic conditions by which Stanley *might* escape become evident in the game's paradoxical pre-scripting which was assembled by the design team. Again, the self-reflexive and satiric humour of the game designers becomes evident, as they manipulate and limit ergodic possibilities in *The Stanley Parable*.

The Escape Pod Ending highlights the necessity of cooperation between any player and the developers or designers of any video game in order to create video game narratives. This game design for the Escape Pod Ending satirizes video games that claim to allow absolute player freedom *purportedly* by providing meaningful choices to players. This ending satirizes such games by showing that player agency alone cannot generate any narrative that is not pre-scripted thereby undermining players' "freedom of choice." The pre-scripted Escape Pod Ending alludes to other video game narratives that arise from a *cooperative* relationship between players and designers. With this ending, that relationship is deliberately sabotaged by the designers of *The Stanley Parable,* thereby generating a satiric view of video game design in general.

Overall, and to conclude this section, *The Stanley Parable* satirically exposes video game design by considering freedom of choice, video game precepts, self-parody, and game ergodics. The design of *The Stanley Parable* indicates that all possible player choices must be anticipated and pre-scripted by the developers of the game. Arguably, *The Stanley Parable's* meta-textual and satiric commentary is provided by positioning Stanley as a cog in a corporate wheel while commenting on the restrictive nature of such jobs. The following section offers short summaries of all nineteen narrative branches in *The Stanley Parable*.

Plot Summary of all nineteen endings:

Art Ending:

If Stanley manages to beat the "Baby game," which appeared in the "Games Ending" branch, then the Narrator will add another game for Stanley to play. However, in order to win the "Baby game," one must spend two real-life hours hitting the same button. If a player has chosen

to spend two hours pressing a button, then the baby is saved, and the Narrator provides a new game for Stanley. In this new game-within-the-game, players must now move between two buttons and press them for another two real-life hours. This second game has no name. After winning the second game, Stanley is transported to an unnamed place to visit an undefined entity called "Divine Art," which proceeds to communicate to Stanley through text on the video screen. Divine Art tells Stanley that it will take care of him after his death and that it loves him. The game restarts.

Broom Closet Ending:

If Stanley goes in the "Broom Closet" room and does not leave, the Narrator starts getting annoyed. The Narrator repeatedly tells Stanley that the Broom Closet has nothing for him to interact with. If Stanley remains inside the Broom Closet, then the Narrator eventually presumes the player controlling Stanley has died. The Narrator then starts requesting someone in the deceased player's vicinity to take their place as "Player 2". The game then restarts. If Stanley once again re-enters the Broom Closet, the Narrator becomes increasingly irritated, but does not restart the game. At that point, the player can either restart the game or exit the Broom Closet and pursue another narrative branch which will inevitably restart the game. After the second attempt to enter the Broom Closet and a second restart, the Broom Closet will be boarded up forever, thereby preventing further entries. In subsequent restarts the Broom Closet is no longer available.

Cold Feet Ending:

　　　If Stanley takes the same route as the "Powerful Ending," but quickly gets off the elevator before it leaves to cross the Warehouse, he can jump off to his death. The Narrator mocks Stanley for not having the courage to go through with his plan. The game restarts.

Confusion Ending:

　　　If Stanley reaches the Maintenance Room and rides the elevator down, the Narrator gets confused as to which path Stanley should take next. After a few successive restarts, Stanley and the Narrator get to a room with the "Confusion Ending" schedule. Even though he seemingly has no other option, the Narrator refuses to restart the game as per the schedule. He attempts to "break" the game and act of his own accord. The game restarts without the Narrator's consent.

Coward Ending:

　　　If one disobeys the Narrator's first command, Stanley closes his office door instead of leaving. He proceeds to sit at his desk, staring at the monitor screen and hoping for things to return to normal. The Narrator comments on Stanley's cowardice. The game restarts.

Escape Pod Ending:

　　　On the way to the Mind Control Facility, if Stanley steps into and immediately out of one of the rooms, all closed doors behind him will be open and the Narrator will be disabled. Upon returning towards Stanley's office, a previously closed door will be opened. If Stanley takes that route, he will find a staircase that, apparently, leads to an escape from the game's infinite loop. Ironically, it is revealed that both Stanley and the Narrator must be present and willing for the

"escape pod" to work. Obviously, he is unable to escape due to the Narrator's absence. The game restarts.

Explosion Ending:

If one pushes the "ON" button in the Mind Control Facility, this ending commences. The Narrator is surprised at Stanley's decision and initiates a nuclear self-destruct program. He comments on Stanley's greed while taunting him. Stanley dies in the explosion. The game restarts.

Freedom Ending:

If one obeys the Narrator's every command, Stanley will destroy the Mind Control Facility by pushing the "OFF" button. He will leave the office building and step into a green field. The Narrator comments on how free Stanley finally feels. The game restarts.

Games Ending:

On the way across the "Warehouse" towards the "Phone Room," Stanley can jump onto an otherwise inaccessible path. He is presented with red and blue doors. If Stanley takes the blue door three times, he is transported to a large unfinished room. Certain of Stanley's distaste for *The Stanley Parable* as a game, The Narrator proceeds to show Stanley some unfinished ideas he has been working on to improve the game. In this meta-game narrative, the Narrator introduces the "baby game," in which Stanley repeatedly pushes a button to keep a baby from burning. If Stanley fails at the "baby" game, he is sent to the world of the video game *Minecraft*, in which he watches the Narrator build a house. Stanley is then sent to the first level of another well-

known video game, *Portal*. After solving a simple puzzle, the Narrator leaves Stanley with no choice but to jump down an elevator shaft. Stanley falls into an unfinished office space where the Narrator apparently cannot track Stanley anymore. The Narrator contemplates Stanley's fate. The game restarts.

Heaven Ending:

If, over several replays, Stanley clicks on five different computers in the office building in the correct order, he will be transported to a place called "Heaven". Heaven is full of colorful buttons that do nothing. Heaven offers nothing else. Players have nothing to interact with in this room and must restart the game if they wish to continue playing.

Mariella/Insane Ending:

While traversing the office building, Stanley may find himself in a never-ending loop of repetitive rooms. As he walks around aimlessly, the Narrator talks about Stanley being insane and delusional. The story the Narrator tells changes to that of Stanley, a man who jumped to his death from the roof of an office building. The Narrator then shifts the story to that of a woman named Mariella, who discovered Stanley's corpse while walking to work. The game restarts.

Museum Ending:

Instead of going to the Mind Control Facility, if one follows the escape sign next to it, the Narrator will warn Stanley that the path leads to death. If Stanley stays on the path, he is ultimately crushed under a machine. Just before his death, however, the game pauses and a female meta-narrator takes over. The narrative digresses, as she transports Stanley to a museum

that contains artwork from the development phase of *The Stanley Parable*. Stanley's only

available choice is to leave the museum. He is then transported back to the moment before his

death as the game is paused. The female narrator addresses the player (not Stanley), and implores

them to quit the game completely in order to escape the game's endless loop. If one does not quit

the game, Stanley is crushed under the machine. The game restarts.

Phone Ending:

If Stanley reaches the Phone Room, the Narrator implores him to answer the phone. If

Stanley does so, he is transported to what looks like his apartment. The Narrator tricks Stanley

into thinking his wife is in the apartment, but then reveals that Stanley does not have any family.

The Narrator starts telling the story of "the death of a man named Stanley" while the game asks

players to push certain buttons. According to the Narrator's story, the plot and narrative branches

of *The Stanley Parable* are the meta-fictional product of Stanley's mind as he sits in his office

and pushes buttons mindlessly. Stanley's apartment slowly transforms into his office. The game

restarts.

Powerful Ending:

Before crossing the Warehouse to reach the Phone Room, Stanley can purposely drop

from a high ledge to his death. The Narrator applauds Stanley for his bravery. The game restarts.

Real Person Ending:

If Stanley reaches the Phone Room, and instead of answering the phone he unplugs it, the

Narrator digresses and puts on an instructional video about responsible decision making. The

player then views a "story within a story" and Stanley is transported to an earlier part of the game, where the player sees the "wreckage" caused by Stanley's "wrong choice" in the Phone Room. Then, the player's perspective shifts, departing from Stanley's body to look down on him from above the structure of the room. Stanley remains stationary as the player no longer controls him. The Narrator pleads for Stanley to do anything and make a choice. Saddened by Stanley's lack of response, the Narrator says that he will patiently wait for him to return. The credits of the game roll. The game restarts.

Serious Ending:

Players can insert the cheat code "sv_cheats 1" into the game. This cheat code can be found online for players who look for them. This cheat code was placed in the game and on the internet by the developers of *The Stanley Parable* in anticipation of players who seek such cheat codes and who reach this ending. In this manner, the game goes outside of its own parameters. If the player finds and inserts the cheat code, then Stanley will be teleported to the "Serious Room." This is a simple room with only one table at the center. Stanley is sentenced by the Narrator to stay in the Serious Room at that table for "one hundred billion, trillion years" for cheating. According to the Narrator, the table is somehow meant to communicate the seriousness of Stanley's transgression. While Stanley is still in the Serious Room, the player may insert the cheat code again. If so, then Stanley is returned to the same room. However, this time the Narrator sentences Stanley to "infinity years" in the Serious Room. If the player inserts the cheat code a third time, Stanley is transported to the Serious Room once again. However, this time, the Narrator gives up on disciplining Stanley and leaves him in the Serious Room in an effort to search for a table that is more fitting to the punishment, as he believes the *table* to be the

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problem. Further inputs of the cheat code have no effect. Regardless of how many times a player has inserted the cheat code there is no other option apart from restarting the game.

Whiteboard Ending:

At random times, upon starting or restarting the game, the office is completely blue. In such instances room 426, just outside of Stanley's office becomes available and open to Stanley. In that room, Stanley finds a whiteboard hanging on the wall with a message that says: "Welcome to the Whiteboard Ending". The cheat code "bark" is written on the whiteboard and when inserted into the game, makes the player's keyboard button for the letter "e" make a barking sound. Players can repeatedly press the "e" key on their keyboard if they wish. There is nothing else in this ending for Stanley to interact with. If players choose to continue playing, they must restart the game.

Window Ending:

If Stanley finds the open window outside his office and exits the building through it, Stanley ends up going "outside the map" into a completely empty space of pure white light. The Narrator then informs Stanley that he did not, as he might have believed, "break" the game and that this is in fact part of the game's design. The Narrator self-reflexively praises the game for its "insightful and witty commentary into the nature of video game structure, and its examination of structural narrative tropes". He then asks Stanley if he is "sick of this gag". If Stanley answers "no," the Narrator talks at length about what could have happened had Stanley answered "yes". If Stanley answers "yes," the Narrator is offended and proceeds to sing a simple song about Stanley's life in an effort to make him "as miserable as possible". The game restarts.

Zending:

If Stanley takes the "games ending" but goes through the red door three times instead of the blue, he will be transported to the Starry Dome room with calming music playing. According to the Narrator, Stanley and the Narrator may find "true happiness" in this room while coexisting. Stanley is left with no option other than going inside another building inside this dome. Within this second building, the only available path is for Stanley to climb the stairs and jump off several stories multiple times while the Narrator begs Stanley to discontinue hurting himself. Before the last jump, the Narrator expresses his chagrin at Stanley's apparent dislike for the Narrator and the game and admits that there is no such thing as true happiness. Stanley falls one last time and the screen fades to black. The game restarts.

For further information on the narrative branches of *The Stanley Parable,* readers are invited to investigate the fan-created wiki website for the game at: thestanleyparable.fandom.com

CHAPTER III: RHIZOMATIC

Before beginning the analyses of *Crusader Kings II* and *Her Story,* this third chapter provides a history of video games with rhizomatic narrative forms while revealing how this format moves beyond conventional literary structures. Rhizomatic games are defined by the absence of any strict narrative structure imposed on players. As defined earlier in the introduction, rhizomatic narratives start *in media res*, with no specific order or ending. Instead, rhizomatic video games provide open systems and mechanics that enable players to create their own stories. As a consequence of their formats, rhizomatic video games generate stories that do not necessarily remediate earlier narrative forms. Such games *could* remediate previous narratives, but only upon the *choice* of the player. Standard literary structures including the comedy, romance, tragedy, or irony/satire are not prevalent in rhizomatic video games. Instead, games with rhizomatic narrative forms allow players to explore the limitations of the game's format-as-medium without any pre-scripted plotline. Therefore, as seen in rhizomatic games such as *Minecraft* or *The Sims,* players can build their own world within the technological limits of the game. There are no fixed "rules" apart from the boundaries the developers introduce into the game's mechanics. For example, in the "Sims" series one can build a house and control a family's life but cannot move to another city or country. In general, rhizomatic games are limited only by the players' imaginations and by the technological limits of the games themselves. If there are any "rules" to such free-play video games, then they are set by the players within the game's technological limits.

It is difficult to find creative precedents that follow similar approaches. Nonetheless, some partial parallels do exist. If one considers expressions that evade genre, then the approach taken by Dadaism arises as a possible precedent to rhizomatic video games. The 1918 Dada

manifesto of Tristan Tzara states that "Dada Means Nothing" (1) and that, "We recognize no theory" (2). Dada absurdism sheds conventional structures by stripping itself of traditional theoretical frameworks. Similarly, rhizomatic games exclude conventional or traditional narrative frameworks. Following the Dada movement, Fluxus composer, John Cage used aleatory forms of composition relying on chance. For example, Cage would sometimes throw dice to compose notes and silences for his musical pieces. In this way, he privileged process over outcome. In his study *Silence* (1961)*,* Cage offers a statement to the directors of the Living Theatre, in lieu of a manifesto that upholds process-oriented modes of composition over outcome-oriented modes. The statement is presented in the picture below;
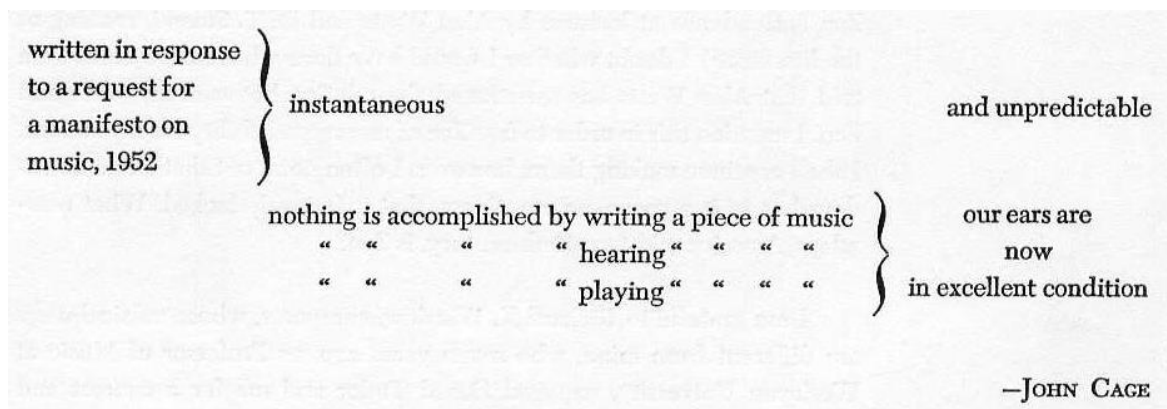
John Cage's manifesto, image taken from *Silence* (xii)

Cage identifies instantaneity, unpredictability, and lack of strict structure as fundamental to his compositional approach. Approaches used by Tzara and Cage anticipate the rhizomatic narrative patterns of contemporary video games. Rhizomatic video games prioritize the creative *process* over any pre-scripted final outcome or ending.

Generally, rhizomatic video games come in one of three main genres. These genres include: Simulation Games, MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games), and "Grand Strategy [G]" Games. It is important to note that not all rhizomatic games belong to one of these three genres, and not all games in these three genres are rhizomatic.

Simulation Games emulate aspects of real life in the form of a game. These games rarely offer goals or "win/lose conditions [G]." Players are often given almost boundless freedom to create their own narratives while navigating the systems and mechanics of the game. Rhizomatic games belonging to this genre include *The Sims* (2000), and *Spore* (2008). *The Sims* creates a playable model of the daily life of a family while *Spore* explores the evolutionary process of fictional species.

In *The Sims* series, players create and take control of a person's or a family's day-to-day life. Players can build and customize their avatars' homes, educate them, find jobs for them, start families, and so on. Players do not have goals that indicate situations where one wins or loses. In games such as *The Sims,* players are granted levels of agency and freedom permitting the creation of narratives informed by players' choices. In this game, there is no pre-scripted narrative structure. Outcomes are un-fixed and are dependent upon player's unpredictable choices, thus echoing Cage's views on chance-based composition.

In *Spore,* players take control of a fictional species from its earliest days as a microscopic organism. The only goal in this game is to survive and evolve into a more complex being. Players are free to choose to be a carnivore or herbivore. Players also choose the physical shapes, attributes, and levels of intelligence for their species including how they might defend themselves. Species can evolve into intelligent beings, allowing players to control tribes, villages, cities, and so on. Similar to *The Sims, Spore* does not have a clear goal for players to reach. The purpose of the game involves exploring a process of evolution or moving a chosen species through its evolutionary track. Players create the narrative of their species on their own, simply based on their chance interactions with the game's mechanics.

The second genre MMORPGs rose to prominence with such games as *World of Warcraft* (2004). Players enter the expansive and highly interactive world of such games with their uniquely customized characters. MMORPGs are played on the internet and allow players from many different locations to interact in the same game. The avatars of diverse players populate MMORPGs' game worlds. One of the attractions of MMORPGs is that players use their avatars in order to cooperate with other players online, but the manner in which they cooperate is entirely open and can result in unpredictable narratives or storylines. One well-known "meme" of how unpredictability can affect a group of interacting online MMORPG (*World of Warcraft*) players involves the case of Leeroy Jenkins as briefly explained in an article by Maya Rhodan titled "The World of Warcraft Leeroy Jenkins Meme is 10 Years Old." According to that article, Jenkins did not attend to a strategy session involving his group of *World of Warcraft* players, and instead went to his kitchen for a snack. Upon returning, Jenkins went rogue and rushed wildly into a dungeon, compromising the carefully planned strategy of his group (n.p.). The result was disastrous and became a widespread joke among MMORPG players. In such games, players have to work with each other to complete missions and overcome the tribulations of a virtual world. Given the community-driven nature of this genre, there is no way to "win" or "lose" an MMORPG. Players are given almost limitless freedom in this genre in regard to creating their characters and their own narratives. The freedom of action offered to players and the lack of win or lose conditions create a rhizomatic narrative experience for players.

The third genre encompasses grand strategy games. In these video games, players take complete control of an entire tribe, city, country, or empire. As a result of these godlike powers, players must manage their realm's economy, social relations and structure, military power, and so on. Grand strategy games such as *Total War: Attila* (2015) focus on the process of

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relationships between player-controlled factions and their allies and rivals (i.e.; social groups). In these games, emerging stories take on a rhizomatic form due to a lack of narrative structure. Players ensure that their social groups survive and thrive by facing challenging situations that require planning and strategic thinking. The narrative in such games is shaped by the player's foresight in anticipating and dealing with unfriendly neighbours, while forming alliances and planning ways of improving one's socio-cultural standing. As such, the narrative is shaped without any specific agenda apart from player decisions and may take any number of forms.

In *Total War: Attila,* players begin in 395 CE as a prominent historical figure. The only requirement for players is to govern their capital city. Apart from that one goal, there is no winning or losing *Total War: Attila*. Instead, players must set their own goals and in doing so, shape their own narratives within the bounds of the game mechanics while interacting with other rulers and civilizations.

Between the linear, branching, and rhizomatic narrative categories, the rhizomatic structure offers players the most agency in creating stories. Rhizomatic games do not restrict plotlines, nor do they require players to follow specifically pre-scripted plots or gameplay paths resulting in any specific narrative outcomes. The three video game genres discussed above are among the most prominent types of rhizomatic video games. This brief look at examples from simulation, MMORPG, and grand strategy games illustrates how video games featuring rhizomatic narratives enable players to create unlimited plotlines within the games' mechanical possibilities. The following two sections in this chapter will provide analyses of *Crusader Kings II* and *Her Story.* These analyses will examine these games' development, themes of morality, levels of player freedom, socio-political themes, and degrees of remediation. Each section will close with a full plot summary of the two video games.

Crusader Kings II

     Crusader Kings II is a grand strategy game published in 2012. In this game, players are asked to lead a nation during the Middle Ages, an era which is presented with high levels of historical accuracy. *Crusader Kings II* does not feature any specific plotline and if a narrative emerges, then it is based on the choices made by the player throughout the game, thereby qualifying this game as rhizomatic in form. In this game, players choose their avatars from the numerous major or minor historical rulers starting between years 769 and 1337 CE and control their dynasties subjects and land, no matter how big or small, until the year 1453 CE, or until they choose to stop playing the game. *Crusader Kings II* provides a range of elements including an array nations, cultures, and religions for players. This wide array permits diverse interactions between factions, making *Crusader Kings II* one of the vastest most complicated grand strategy video games available.

     Although the game was first released in 2012, since then its developers have added over a dozen expansions to the core mechanics of the game. The constantly growing set of game mechanics in *Crusader Kings II* works well with a lack of scripted plotlines to provide as much narrative freedom for players as possible. Players' interactions with the game are not limited by plot requirements, neither are they greatly limited by gameplay mechanics. As a result, players can enter the world of *Crusader Kings II* and create their own goals, face unique difficulties, and overcome challenges in ways of their choosing. The game's mechanics provide numerous choices for players involving warfare, conquering nations, foreign and domestic political intrigue, diplomacy, economic prosperity, scientific progress, religious ideologies and cultural identities. These mechanics also introduce moral dilemmas to players and, by giving them

numerous choices reflects their moral and socio-cultural disposition. The moral implications of such mechanics will be discussed in detail in this section.

When players choose their avatars, they are automatically assigned several of the above-mentioned options as starting conditions. For example, if the chosen avatar rules a county in Ireland, then their religion and cultural background will be historically accurate according to the selected year and locale. Players can choose from a variety of avatars situated in different locales and time-periods. Since there are almost no limitations on who to choose as one's avatar and on how one can rule over their domain, the progression of cultural, political, economic, and religious attributes of the domain is up to players' choices. One could, for example, *attempt* to recreate historically accurate scenarios, or to create an alternate history.

For example, one of my personal experiences playing *Crusader Kings II* inevitably led to the creation of an intriguing alternate history. I started the game at the year 769 CE as a relatively weak Welsh count with the goal of creating the British Empire. I achieved this goal by the year 1200 CE. My playthrough became historically inaccurate because in actuality, England did not unite until the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 CE and did not emerge as an empire until considerably later. In my playthrough of *Crusader Kings II*, I diverted Britain from Catholicism to a pagan religion while adopting Welsh customs as the primary culture. This example of a personal experience shows how *Crusader Kings II* permits unrestricted possibilities in creating alternate histories. In fact, given the number of possible unpredictable circumstances in this game, it is almost impossible for a player to duplicate history accurately. *Crusader Kings II* enables players to create their own historical narratives and refrains from restricting such narratives. Due to the wide range of gameplay options and mechanics, players can construct a unique narrative each time they play the game. While playing *Crusader Kings II,* players are free

to utilize any of the game's mechanics while striving for survival, growth, and prosperity for their dominions. However, some of the game's mechanics, while realistic and historically accurate, can introduce moral dilemmas. Such dilemmas arise from in-game possibilities such as unreasonable demands from less powerful factions, rejecting reasonable demands from others, murdering political rivals, releasing war criminals from prison for political gain, infanticide, and betraying one's liege.

Like *Darkest Dungeon, Crusader Kings II* includes a paradox in its design. In order to succeed in helping one's community or nation survive and succeed, one is pushed and persuaded by the game to perform malevolent acts. In short, malevolent acts are rewarded by the game's mechanics while benevolent acts are penalized, and so *Crusader Kings II* raises significant moral issues for players. While some of these malevolent acts such as infanticide are clearly immoral actions and test the limits of the player's ambitions, some possible actions in this game serve to reveal the player's moral, socio-cultural, and ideological prejudices and dispositions. I will demonstrate and explore the implications of such malevolent acts in *Crusader Kings II* by discussing some possible examples of available actions and how such actions can enable and reflect the player's morality.

As mentioned above, the first category of malevolent acts includes those which are unequivocally evil with little to no ideologically charged motive. For example, if a player's nation follows the gavelkind succession law, then, upon the death of the player's avatar, their domain is distributed equally between the avatar's children, one of which becomes the new player avatar. Given that, in such a scenario, players lose some of their acquired land in the transition from one avatar to the next. Such an outcome is generally unfavorable in building power and hinders the player's progress. The player has two main options to avoid such a loss,

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they can either change the succession law before their avatar's death or kill all children except for one. The mechanical difference between the two options shows how *Crusader Kings II* pushes players towards malevolent acts. Changing succession laws takes time, planning, and resources. Furthermore, characters who lose the prospect of inheriting land will vehemently oppose the change and will dislike the ruler who changed the law as well as the next ruler who benefits from it. Since these enraged figures are powerful members of the ruling family, they might be capable of toppling their ruler or of hindering the nation's progress.

Similar to *Darkest Dungeon,* the paradox in the design of *Crusader Kings II* is that it makes both moral and immoral options available to players but only makes the latter mechanically desirable. In this case, the more expedient albeit immoral option is killing all but one of the player's avatar's children as a way to prevent loss of territory and power. If the avatar is successful, then the remaining child becomes the sole heir and, as the player's next avatar, will retain complete control of the territory. To briefly examine the practicality of this option, the player's avatar needs to be an accomplished conspirator and employ an efficient spy master. If the assassination plot is revealed, then the avatar loses the respect and favor of almost all influential people and is known as a "kin slayer." However, if their plans remain concealed and successful, the player bypasses the legal barriers of the game's society without losing anyone's favor or respect. The challenges of *Crusader Kings II* push the player towards this immoral and malevolent option by making it easier to achieve such reprehensible goals.

As mentioned before, the inherent paradox of this game is that it offers both moral and immoral options to players. Thus, the player must make morally charged decisions when engaging with this game. One can either spend more time and in-game resources to try and remain on an ethical path, or one can forgo ethics and choose the expeditious and efficient

option. The moral complexity of *Crusader Kings II* moves beyond offering players choices between evil and ethical options. Many of the available options in this game might reflect the player's moral disposition more directly. The game achieves this level of moral interactivity by introducing social issues that are current and relatable in today's society. For example, an avatar's heir could be homosexual or have a learning disability. Such characters are not forbidden from becoming rulers and technically, the game does not "disapprove" of them. However, the player faces greater difficulties if their avatar is homosexual or has a learning disability. The former can have trouble producing an heir and is constantly in danger of being persecuted by religious leaders. Alternately, an avatar with a learning disability may end up doing a suboptimal job performing their tasks as a ruler due to problems with their mental faculties. Thus, a player may decide to murder their child, thereby turning another child into the heir simply because having a homosexual ruler or one with a learning or physical disability makes progress more difficult. Alternately, a player might sympathize with such characters while supporting disability and LGBTQ+ rights, thereby resisting the discriminatory bias of the game's mechanics.

In cases where in-game moral predicaments are socially current for players, the mechanical risks of taking empathetic options in *Crusader Kings II* are much lower. For example, having a homosexual ruler or one with a learning disability might slow the player's progression but is unlikely to result in a loss of territory. As such, players face less severe consequences for their empathetic approach to socially relatable moral issues in the game.

In *Crusader Kings II*, players can make decisions based on their socio-cultural beliefs even when such decisions are not pushed or prompted by the game. These player-generated moral decisions can be benevolent or malevolent in themselves, thus allowing the game to reflect

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the socio-cultural stance of the player. For example, the player's choices might reveal their possible Orientalist or colonialist viewpoints. In his 1978 book *Orientalism*, Edward Said focuses on the dominant culture's view of any other significantly different culture by defining the term Orientalism as follows:

> Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient— dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." (3).

This definition of Orientalism can be applied to most colonial situations including those presented in this game. Thus, if a player wishes to expand their territory and retain conquered lands, then they are likely to use methods of cultural subjugation similar to those mentioned by Said. The player can choose the nature, severity, and extent of such methods. By offering such choices to players, the game can reflect and reveal a player's anxieties concerning possible threats from foreign powers and desires of exploiting these foreign cultures.

For example, a player whose native territory is Catholic Ireland could conquer parts of the Muslim Abbasid Caliphate. As per the design of the game, the invading forces would constitute a Catholic majority in this hypothetical empire, resulting in mutual antagonism between the occupying forces and the indigenous Muslim population. The most expeditious way to resolve this problem is to attempt to change the new subject's beliefs and identity. This goal can be achieved by outlawing Islam, seeking out and punishing "heretics," and appointing rulers from the conqueror's culture to the new territory. Such actions, among others, might resemble tactics used by European colonizers against colonized nations. The effects of such tactics can be

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traced in previously colonized countries like India where discrimination against people with darker skin tones and different spiritual beliefs was part of the attitude displayed by the Caucasian British colonizers.

Game mechanics in *Crusader Kings II* serve to reveal two possible aspects of players' socio-cultural dispositions. First, the willingness to conquer other lands to accumulate wealth could reflect the player's underlying colonial attitudes. Second, the manner in which the player might antagonize these conquered lands while attempting to homogenize such diverse cultures could reflect the player's possible Orientalist or neo-colonial attitudes.

It is important to note that the moral paradox of *Crusader Kings II* persists, meaning empathetic choices are mechanically disadvantageous even when such moral predicaments are not pushed by the game. An example of a player-prompted ethical decision can be seen in an online personality's engagement with *Crusader Kings II*. A *YouTube* user named "Enigmaticrose4" has published multiple series of videos in which she plays *Crusader Kings II* with a different goal each time. In one of these series, titled "CK2 Jade Dragon: Ladies of Ireland," she aims to subvert the gender norms embedded within the game by building an Irish empire with only female rulers (n.p.). In this playthrough of the game, this player becomes an advocate for gender equality and creates an alternate history where, in the chosen time and locale, women can hold political titles and become rulers. This is a conscious and proactive moral decision from the player which is not encouraged or discouraged by the game as an integral aspect of playing *Crusader Kings II*. In the approach taken by Enigmaticrose4 in "Ladies of Ireland," it was revealed that the benevolent pursuit of gender equality was impossible without malevolent acts such as murder, assassination, infanticide, and so on. Such actions could be evaded since the world of *Crusader Kings II* which generally consists of powerful male figures

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disapproves of female rulers in favor of continuing the patriarchy and retaining political power for men. Therefore, other characters in the game may oppose female rulers as well as the decision to change the gender succession laws to "Enatic," in which only female children can inherit land and titles.

The above example shows that, in *Crusader Kings II*, one cannot be an agent of positive change without committing malevolent acts. This revelation is key in understanding how this game reflects players' moralities while commenting on the immoral actions of rulers throughout history. *Crusader Kings II* reflects players' moralities by offering choices that are morally ambiguous. In other words, the player does not choose between "good" and "evil." Instead, the player chooses either to forgo morality in favor of expeditious progression through the game, or to act sympathetically in one or more aspects of social, cultural, or political interaction while still committing malevolent acts in other aspects. Thus, any player's moral disposition is reflected through their choices.

The game also illuminates the incessant immorality within human history through the same mechanic. If the player chooses to become a ruthless ruler, then they reflect this immoral history. Conversely, even if a player decides to "fix" certain immoral aspects of history, then they must still take part in other malevolent actions. Thus, even if the player decides to adhere to moral approaches *Crusader Kings II* still forces them to take part in acts of callousness which may echo acts of aggression practiced by colonial powers throughout history.

Crusader Kings II sometimes incorporates actual historical events and provides options to players who might wish to replicate or alter those aspects of history, thereby revealing the player's morality while highlighting the ethical shortcomings of rulers throughout history. The game offers players high levels of interactivity, thereby reflecting the player's moral dispositions

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while also depicting and highlighting how powerful rulers have abused their power throughout history. For example, becoming the king or queen of England unlocks an option for the player allowing them to expel Jews while confiscating their possessions. If, at that time, the majority of the country is Catholic, then such an action also pleases the Pope and other religious leaders. This option is based on actual historical events. In 1290, King Edward I issued the Edict of Expulsion, expelling all Jews from the Kingdom of England. The edict remained in effect for over 350 years. If the player chooses to take this option, then the monarch can borrow a relatively large sum of money from the Jewish community and then immediately expel them, wiping out the debt while confiscating their possessions. It is also important to note that a subsequent monarch can welcome Jews back into their domain and then repeat the same process for monetary gain with little to no consequences. Thus, the player can choose to use the tyrannical actions of past rulers and enjoy the valuable economic advantages that come with utilizing this malevolent option while disregarding the plight of minority communities. Alternately, players can choose a more difficult but empathetic route by ignoring this option.

As demonstrated above, *Crusader Kings II* grants nearly unlimited power to players. Pulitzer Prize winner Robert Caro, one of the foremost experts on the concept of power and its effects on people summarizes his lifelong research on the subject in a 2019 interview with David Marchese for the online *New York Times* magazine as follows:

> During all these years I did come to understand stuff about power that I wanted people to know. You read in every textbook that cliché: Power corrupts. In my opinion, I've learned that power does not always corrupt. Power can cleanse. When you're climbing to get power, you have to use whatever methods are necessary, and you have to conceal your aims. Because if people knew your aims, it might make them not want to give you

power. Prime example: the southern senators who raised Lyndon Johnson up in the Senate. They did that because he had made them believe that he felt the same way they did about black people and segregation. But then when you get power, you can do what you want. So, power reveals. (n.p.).

The power offered to players to shape narratives in games such as *Darkest Dungeon* and *Crusader Kings II* seems to have the moral implications discussed by Caro. One cannot use their powers to create a utopia in either of these games as violent and immoral actions are ultimately inescapable. However, the power given to the player is not always corruptive either. As demonstrated before in *Darkest Dungeon,* the player can follow an empathetic route. Similarly, in *Crusader Kings II* the player is free to use the game mechanics for benevolent purposes such as fighting for gender equality. Thus, these games do not necessarily portray power simply as corruptive, but instead mirror the player's intentions by sharing the game developers' "authorial" powers with the player. As argued by Caro and demonstrated by this analysis, the inherent properties of any kind of power, including the authorial power within a "text" functions to reveal the intentions of the wielder, in this case the player.

Any narrative that emerges from *Crusader Kings II* results from the game's rhizomatic structure which forgoes a pre-scripted plotline. As indicated by Bartel in the introduction to this thesis, players are free to act as they wish even when restricted by game mechanics. As such, possible choices to, for example, assassinate another character or to plot the death of a family member put the player in a morally challenging position. Players are essentially tested to see how quickly they turn to immoral actions in favor of self-preservation since the game's challenges are much more easily managed if one agrees to murder rivals, marginalize minority groups, and so on. The nature of player interaction in *Crusader Kings II* reveals countless possible morally

charged narratives that players might create on their own each time they interact with the game. Such interactions serve to reveal player's moral dispositions while simultaneously gesturing to the history of aggressive colonial actions throughout history.

Some *possible* narrative outcomes in *Crusader Kings II:*

Given its rhizomatic nature and lack of a scripted plotline, each player experiences a completely different narrative each time they play *Crusader Kings II.* As such, it is not possible to provide a plot summary of this game that encompasses the different experiences of all players. Nevertheless, certain events, opportunities, and other mechanics are present in *most* playthroughs of this game. Reviewing some of the possible outcomes of these mechanics could serve to provide a somewhat clearer idea of the possible narrative outcome in *Crusader Kings II.*

One of the main possible objectives a player could set for themselves in this game is to expand their territory by gaining more land. In order to do so and depending on the chosen faction, one could wage war on neighboring territories, demand more land from their liege if their nation is not independent, or marry themselves into power. Waging war can be made difficult if, for example, the player's chosen faction is Catholic, in which case they must gain a special permission to attack others from the Pope. The most time-efficient, albeit immoral, way to work around this problem is for the player's avatar to fabricate a false claim to the land they wish to conquer in order to gain Papal sanction. A player's avatar can also attempt to conquer without any justification whatsoever. The latter option might bring unforeseen repercussions since a Catholic ruler must defy the Pope in order to unjustifiably attack others purely to gain more land.

Avatars can also marry into ruling families of other realms and from there, find their way to the throne. In order to do so after entering the succession line of a ruling family, avatars can either use diplomacy to gain favors or they can assassinate their way up the chain of command. Diplomacy is effective within governments like the Byzantine Empire. In such systems, avatars could find favors by distributing monetary gifts, handing out ornamental titles, or otherwise making influential characters "like" the avatar. Each character in the world of *Crusader Kings II* has an opinion about all other people. A character with a friendly attitude towards the avatar might support them in their endeavors, while a character who is hostile or hateful towards the avatar will try to harm their dominion if given the chance. As such, getting other influential figures to "like" the avatar might end up gaining them enough favor to peacefully conquer the land they wish to rule.

On the other hand, the immoral, faster, and far more common option is for the avatar to assassinate their way to the thrones of other realms. Each ruler in this game has a number of council members, each with their own specialty. Among those, the master spy, who takes different names in different cultures and languages can help the avatar build a network of spies who can do the avatar's bidding. Players can use spies to plot the death of the person above them in the line of succession. Some game options involving such scenarios include: giving an ultimatum to the target to make them leave their station, poisoning the target's wine, ambushing the target's caravan, drowning the target in their bathtub, releasing a poisonous snake in the target's chamber, killing the target while they hunt and making it seem like an accident, and so on. It is significant that any of these possibilities can yield different results each time they are used. It is noteworthy that if word of the avatar's involvement with the assassination attempt is revealed, then they stand to lose their reputation in circles of power. The options listed above are

only a few of the key possibilities in game narratives that are nearly endless and dependent upon players' choices within the rhizomatic structure of *Crusader Kings II*.

Her Story:

Released in 2015, *Her Story* is an "interactive movie [G]" video game that features a free-play rhizomatic format. In this game, players act as detectives searching through seven police interviews conducted with a murder suspect in an attempt to solve a murder mystery. Only fragments of the interviews can be accessed on the game's database. There is only one suspect interviewed in this game and the interviewer remains unseen. Because the interviews are broken into many shorter parts, it is not possible to view any single full interview. Instead, players can only view short fragments of the seven main interviews. There are hundreds of these short video-clip fragments and each one lasts between five to twenty seconds. If they so choose, players can try to assemble the purported facts of the "murder" case. Thus, *Her Story* begins in an aleatory manner, because players choose and type in keywords relating to the case in order to engage with the game. However, the game has no specific requirements. To initiate and play the game, players can select any random word and if that word exists in the database, then the selected word will release up to five video-clip fragments. Video-clips are made available to the player in chronological order. Players can pursue the *apparent* facts of the case, but in this game, the murder mystery has no resolution. Even if one could jump to the final video-clip in the final interview with the murder suspect, it would not provide enough information to "solve" the case. Players are free to develop their own understanding of the murder case. They develop this understanding based on the keywords they deem important enough to search for and on how their unique search results shape their idea of the story. It is important to mention that the game

does not require players to declare their verdicts or suspicions. *Her Story* only provides the short video-clips and leaves all else to players.

The game was written, directed, and developed by Sam Barlow. In an interview published on the game news website *MCV* titled "Crime pays: The making of Her Story," Barlow states that he focused on his core idea of a "police procedural [G]" game which allowed him to create "[an] intimate setting, dialogue, and character interaction" (n.p.). According to their website, *Her Story* was "crowdfunded [G]" by *Indie Fund,* a group of "indie [G]" developers who fund promising small budget game projects (n.p.). *Her Story* was approved and published through the now discontinued Steam Greenlight system which allowed players to vote for their favorite "indie" games to be digitally published by Steam, one of the most prominent digital distribution platforms for video games ("Her Story," steamcommunity.com).

According to Keith Stuart's article, "Her Story: how J G Ballard and Sharon Stone inspired the award-winning game," published in *The Guardian* website, the three main inspirations behind *Her Story* for Barlow include author J. G. Ballard's short stories, actress Sharon Stone's audition tapes for the movie *Basic Instinct* (1992), and police interrogation textbooks (n.p.). J. G. Ballard's short stories inspired Barlow to explore the "gamification [G]" of a detective story in which players must discover supposed "facts" and keep track of them to be an active participant while investigating a murder case. In his article, Stuart explains that Barlow decided to create "unpolished" video-clip footage for *Her Story*, as inspired by Sharon Stone's audition tapes for the movie *Basic Instinct*. Stuart goes on to explain that the video-clips in *Her Story* are void of "tricks of the cinema" and that is what makes them seem more "intimate and real" (n.p.).

According to the above-mentioned article, *Basic Instinct* inspired Sam Barlow's interest in how the public reacts to female murder suspects (n.p.). Barlow's interest can be seen in topics arising in the game, including the exploration of fertility, sexual fidelity, and formation of identity. The game reveals players' attitudes involving expected gender roles in society. Players may find themselves questioning their own perceptions of a female murder suspect, as well as their judgement of the suspect and her story due to the unstable nature of the emerging information provided in the video-clips. The game's ethical aspects become evident through player interaction with the supposed "facts" of the case. As one plays *Her Story,* it becomes evident that no facts can be verified. The relative guilt or innocence of the suspect remains in the mind of the player. As such, this game reveals more about the player's cultural conditioning than it does about the developer's or about the murder case. The ethical dimension of this game is similar to other games such as *Darkest Dungeon* and *Crusader Kings II* where players are faced with ethical conundrums that cannot be resolved by the games themselves but are reliant on how players interact with and approach the game.

Her Story helps players reveal their own moral disposition via their choices of keywords and the narrative that they build in their minds around the accused suspect. Judith Butler's "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" and Jacques Lacan's "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" help identify the effects of the game's interactive features on how characters' identities in the game might be perceived by players as well as how players might express their own identity when playing *Her Story*. Furthermore, Annette Kolodny's views on literary canon as presented in "Dancing through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism" demonstrate how *Her Story* situates itself outside of the canon of detective narratives

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by centering its narrative on player interactivity and how that affects the player. Using Butler's examination of desire's role in the formation of one's identity, this analysis demonstrates some possible player approaches towards the characters within *Her Story's* plot. This section also examines how *Her Story* makes players face their own moral dispositions when considering Lacan's "mirror stage" and the idea of "projection." Before beginning these analyses, I'll provide an in-depth look at the game's mechanics followed by a brief plot summary.

The free-play quality in *Her Story* is largely due to the *lack* of win or lose conditions/rules. *Her Story* is a detective narrative, which implies that there is a mystery to be solved, and it is a game, which implies that there is a system of rules in place that will reward players who adhere to that system, but the game never validates or dismisses players' guesses and/or conclusions. Players cannot check to see whether their suspicions are correct or incorrect. In essence, the game provides players with fragments of information and it is their responsibility to piece the fragments together. In fact, there is no definitive "truth" to be unraveled in this game. Hence, any "narrative" that emerges in this game will result from the path of uncovered "evidence" during a player's investigation into the murder case. Each player will pursue a different path. Also, it would be quite difficult if not impossible to duplicate the path of evidence if the game is played again. As a result of the unfixed narrative possibilities, this game qualifies as rhizomatic. In addition, the game's path may be affected by the player's attitude towards the suspect who was interviewed by the police.

By requiring players to piece together the narrative of the game, *Her Story* creates an unfixed rhizomatic plotline that provides an experience closer to that of an actual detective for its players. In this video game, the process of finding evidence and gaining knowledge about the murder case is only minimally "gamified." Elyse Graham defines the term "gamification" in her

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book *Republic of Games* as follows: "introducing game mechanics to digital platforms for the production and circulation of text(s)" (3). *Her Story* includes few game mechanics, lacking such prominent features such as win or lose conditions, confirming or rejecting players' hypotheses regarding the mystery, limiting their choices, and so on. This lack of complicated game mechanics means that *Her Story* abstains from judging its own characters and puts the moral weight on the player's shoulders.

The lack of gamification means fewer restrictive rules and mechanics that players must follow while uncovering information about the murder. Most other well-known detective video games, including *L.A. Noire* (2011) and the *Ace Attorney* series (2001-2017), do not deviate from the conventions of video game mechanics. Those games offer multiple paths towards solving mysteries, but the paths are either correct or incorrect. The games usually make it clear to players if they have taken the right or the wrong path. Furthermore, there is always an objective truth or definite end to those games. Games such as *L.A. Noire* are either linear or branching in format and can be understood as remediations of detective genre forms by authors such as Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Raymond Chandler, or Dashiell Hammett.

However, due to its rhizomatic or free-play format, *Her Story* does *not* remediate such earlier detective genre stories because it has no fixed conclusion and no "right" or "wrong" solution to the mystery. *Her Story* rejects the conventions of canonic works within the detective genre much in the spirit of Kolodny's argument against fetishizing literary canon as discussed in "Dancing Through the Minefields." Instead of centering the plot on a smart detective and their attempts at solving a complicated mystery, the game focuses on the suspect. The role of the detective is split between an interviewer who is never seen nor heard and the player who can merely access, not gather, evidence. As such, this story is not about a detective who cleverly

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unravels a mystery. It is about both a female suspect's dubious story and a *player* who explores their morality and socio-cultural presuppositions by attempting to solve the mystery. Kolodny interprets the changes in English and American literary canon in the 19 and the 20th century as shifts in "canonical 'wisdom'" and asserts that "This [shift] suggests, then, that our sense of a 'literary history' and, by extension, our confidence in a 'historical' canon, is rooted not so much in any definitive understanding of the past, as it is in our need to call up and utilize the past on behalf of a better understanding of the present" (9). According to Kolodny's observation, literary canon can be a great asset in understanding the present by providing a window to the past. *Her Story's* diversion from the canon seems to serve the same purpose as suggested by Kolodny because the game *utilizes* certain tropes of past canonical detective fiction to reveal the present socio-cultural dispositions of its audiences. Because of the game's rhizomatic format, these tropes, including clever detectives who notice minute details in the evidence and arrive at logical conclusions are attributed to the player. As such, the player indirectly interacts with canonical tropes of detective fiction to reveal their present state of their morality.

The free-play aspect of this game departs from the fixed logic of detective genre mystery novels. Arguably, this departure marks a new development in the detective literary form. The audience is granted unprecedented levels of agency, and the conclusion to the mystery remains open. The attraction of this game involves the *process* of discovery rather than the *outcome* involving the mystery. *Her Story* makes players feel like detectives by presenting them with fragments of information, while leaving them free to come to their own conclusions. In addition, a player's personal bias can affect the choice of keywords and might shape the player's perception of the relative guilt or innocence of Hannah, the suspect.

Hannah, the widowed wife of a murder victim, is brought into a police station for interrogation. After a while, she claims that she has a *twin* sister named Eve from whom she was separated at birth. *Apparently*, Simon, Hannah's husband, fell in love with Eve which complicated the sisters' relationship and culminated in Simon's murder. Upon using a lie detector in the last interview, it is revealed that some of the interviews, including the last one, were attended by Eve instead of Hannah. At the end, Eve informs the police that Hannah murdered Simon and ran away. The so-called "facts" of this case are impossible to prove, making it equally impossible to trust either Hannah or Eve. In addition, upon watching the majority of the video clips, players can choose to end the game. Upon concluding play, it is revealed to players that their avatar is Sarah, presumably the child of Eve and Simon, who is investigating the case to learn more about her mother.

Her Story utilizes this open-ended mystery and acts as a mirror which reflects aspects of the player's identity. In "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," published as part of his book titled *Écrits,* Lacan defines the mirror stage "*as an identification,* in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image–whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the term *imago*" (503). By enabling players to construct their own narratives while playing the game, *Her Story* lets the player assume an *imago* through the avatar. The "mirror" function in video games such as *Her Story* does not replicate Lacan's mirror stage completely. However, this function, itself a direct result of higher degrees of player interactivity, does provide a partial construction or reconstruction of players' moral and cultural values. As such, players tend to project their

anxieties and desires onto the game in order to experience narrative results that validate or affirm their personal socio-political and socio-cultural ideologies.

Examining some possible player interaction options in *Her Story* helps clarify how this game reflects the morality of the player. The manner in which players explore *Her Story's* narrative is unpredictable because the player chooses which keywords to search for. For example, it is possible for a player who has not gained access to all available video-clips to come across one that makes the suspect appear guilty. At this point, the player can either assume that they have solved the mystery and have uncovered the truth about the suspect, or reserve judgement and continue their search. The game itself does not validate or reward either of the mentioned approaches. As a result, *why* a player would choose to either keep looking for clues or to cease the investigation depends on the player.

For example, a player with misogynistic attitudes might approach the game believing that the suspect is guilty simply based on her gender. Such a player might aim to prove the suspect's guilt and not to solve the mystery. It is feasible to imagine that this player might believe the game to be over once they reach the aforementioned possible point in the game, not because they believe they have seen every video-clip, but because they *want* the story to conclude at that point. Conversely, a player who does not share the same misogynistic values might consider the possibility that the story is more complicated than what it seems and choose to continue searching for more clues instead of assuming that the female suspect is guilty. As indicated above, *Her Story's* interactive features allow the game to reflect and reveal the player's moral and socio-cultural stance.

The identities of the three main characters in *Her Story* are another example of how the player can shape the narrative in *Her Story*. Judith Butler's discussion of identity and desire in

her 1993 article "Imitation and Gender Subordination" is integral in understanding how players'

presuppositions affect the characters' emergent identity each time a player interacts with the

game. In "Imitation and Gender Subordination," Butler argues,

> Some psychoanalytic theories tend to construe identification and desire as two mutually
>
> exclusive relations to love objects that have been lost through prohibition and/or
>
> separation. Any intense emotional attachment thus divides into either wanting to have
>
> someone or wanting to be that someone, but never both at once. It is important to
>
> consider that identification and desire can coexist, and that their formulation in terms of
>
> mutually exclusive oppositions serves a heterosexual matrix (316).

According to Butler's argument, society normally dictates that one cannot identify themselves

with a person *and* make that person one's object of desire. As such, players who separate the role

of identification and desire in their interpretation of the relationship between the three main

characters in *Her Story* potentially reveal heteronormative attitudes while interacting with the

game.

It is important to note that, according to the police interviews, the three main characters

of the plot include the victim, Simon, his wife, Hannah, and her supposed twin sister, Eve.

Although the plot includes a love triangle between the three, Simon is not the only "love object"

in *Her Story*. Regardless whether Hannah and Eve are in fact sisters or if they are two

personalities of the same person, they can be considered each other's "love objects." Each player

constructs their own idea of the relationship between Hannah and Eve. Therefore, this

relationship, which is fundamental to the narrative of the game, may or may not become

heteronormative based on the *player's* ideology.

As argued by Butler, the separation of desire and identification in relation to a "love object" is potentially a sign of heteronormativity. Therefore, if one subscribes to heteronormative ideas, they might only consider the role of identification in the relationship between the two sisters while excluding the role of desire. In other words, such a player may concur that, at different points of the story, Hannah and Eve want to *become* one other. However, the same player might not consider that Hannah and Eve may also want to *have* one another. This exclusion is possible because a "heterosexual matrix," as Butler calls it, tends to limit the role of desire to romantic heterosexual relationships. As such, our hypothetical player with heteronormative views might believe that Hannah and Eve do not want to *have* each other, only Simon. As a result, Simon may be viewed as the locus of both Hannah and Eve's identity if the player believes that the sisters desire only Simon. Thus, such a player might view Hannah and Eve as incomplete personalities after Simon's death. This view essentially forces the two main female characters of the game to delegate part of the construction of their identity to Simon. It is feasible to believe that, at different points in the story, Hannah and Eve want to *become* each other. In order to be the twin with the desirable family, Eve impersonated Hannah for much of her childhood and adolescence and later Hannah impersonated Eve in order to discover her husband's true feelings for her sister. Both acts of impersonation are direct results of wanting to *be* the other.

However, to adopt Butler's outlook, both sisters' desire to *be* the other might accompany the desire to *have* the other at the same time. If the player does *not* subscribe to heteronormative ideas, then Eve shows her desire to *become* Hannah, but also to make certain aspects of Hannah's identity her own. For example, by impersonating Hannah, the outgoing and sociable Eve attempts to enjoy the more homely image of Hannah that brings them both the acceptance of

their parents all without *becoming* homely. Conversely, when Hannah impersonates Eve, she shows her desire to *have* Eve's rebellious image without changing her identity. Furthermore, the latter impersonation might also reflect the infertile Hannah's desire to *have* Eve's fertility and, by extension, unborn child while she cannot change the state of her body. Such important nuances to these key characters are only available to players who look beyond Simon while searching for Hannah and Eve's identity. Players who adopt heteronormative attitudes might seek to anchor the sisters' identities to their romantic relationship with a man and, as a result miss some of the intricacies of their relationship and perhaps even some of the possible motifs for the murder. These examples show how *Her Story* enables players and their moral dispositions to influence and define the narrative of the game.

A player with heteronormative tendencies might limit the role of female-female relationship in the construction of either Hannah or Eve's identity in favor of a romantic male-female relationship. Such a player *wants* to see heteronormativity reflected in narratives around them and highly interactive video games such as *Her Story* grant them almost instant gratification. If a player does *not* subscribe to heteronormative ideas, games such as *Her Story* are still capable of reflecting the player's ideologies. Such a player can influence the narrative of the game so that the construction of female characters' identities is not dependent on their romantic relationships with a man. These two examples serve to demonstrate how *Her Story* lets players project their own ideologies onto the game and, thus, this game reveals the morality of the player rather than pushing its own socio-political or socio-cultural agenda onto the player.

The narrative of *Her Story* will emerge differently for each player. Since players choose keywords to observe fragments of video-recordings, *Her Story's* narrative is quite disjoined. This structural disjunction of the narrative serves to reflect the disjunctive life of Hannah and Eve.

Just as the sisters' identities are intertwined and difficult for others to keep track of, so is the manner in which players explore their story. Furthermore, this narrative disjunction helps bring the player's possible biases to the forefront. As discussed before, because fragments of the narrative of *Her Story* are presented to players in an unpredictable manner that depends partly on the player's choices of keywords, players have more authority over the construction of the narrative. As such, the disjunction of the narrative of *Her Story* may also reflect the moral disjunction of the player.

The original seven interviews with the suspect were continuous, but those continuous recordings are not made available to the game's player. Players can "cheat" by going outside of the game onto *YouTube* to watch the *full* interviews in chronological order. For those interested, a summary of the video clips involving the seven police interviews is included at the end of this section. Even if one gains access to all seven interviews in their chronological and complete form, then a conclusion still remains ambiguous. The rhizomatic form of this game makes the vague "facts" of the case ambiguous.

In conclusion, *Her Story* shows that although most rhizomatic games do not have any plots, they *could* include plotlines and still give players the freedom to create their own narratives. This game features a scripted plotline which, outside of the context of the game, would be considered linear. However, the disjointed and unpredictable method of unraveling this plot turns the narrative into a rhizomatic one where players must decide *how* to piece together the ruptured plot. Players rely on their own socio-political dispositions to determine the answer to the mystery as well as aspects of the characters' identities. For example, a player's attitude towards issues of mental illness might result in them believing that the "twin" sisters are in fact one person who suffers from multiple personality disorder. A player with misogynistic

tendencies might believe that the female suspect is the murderer before watching a large

percentage of the video clips. Such a player might not feel the need to probe deeper into the

mystery because of their moral and socio-political attitudes. Also, as demonstrated using Butler,

heteronormative ideas of the player might dictate the identity of Hannah and Eve. In this way,

players' moral choices in *Her Story* are almost entirely meta-textual. These choices do not find

any visual representation in the form of videos, dialogue, or mechanics in this game. Instead,

they happen solely in the minds of players as they try to unravel and piece together the narrative

of the game.

     Her Story is emblematic of how video game narratives have only begun to push the

boundaries of the medium. Games such as *Her Story* are introducing innovations in video game

storytelling by using the medium's interactive features to allow players to create their own

narratives. As a result, the socio-cultural and moral statements in such games are made by the

player instead of the developer or writer of the game. This level of audience interactivity marks a

major and unprecedented breakthrough in most literary genres since, in these games, the

audience/player shares a "writerly" or "authoritative" function with the game's developers. Thus,

games such as *Her Story* make their moral and socio-political statements by engaging and

mirroring the *player's* morality. *Her Story* presents moral predicaments to players allowing them

to proceed according to their own morals and, in doing so, the game reflects the player's attitude

towards current social issues.

Summary of the video interviews with the murder suspect:

     The murder case *Her Story* is set in England. What follows is a summary of the seven

police interviews with the suspect as featured on *YouTube*. All seven *YouTube* interviews feature

a woman who introduces herself as Hannah Smith, whose husband, Simon, has been murdered and found in their house. Hannah admits that she and Simon had a rocky relationship, but has an alibi placing her in Glasgow at the time of the murder. She claims that they had an argument and she rode off to Glasgow with no particular destination in mind. When her story cannot be verified, Hannah admits that she has an identical twin sister named Eve, who no one knows about. She claims they were separated at birth by a midwife, Florence. Apparently, Florence was a widow who lived across the street from Hannah's family. Florence desperately wanted to have children but did not believe in remarrying. So, she faked the death of one of the twins and claimed her for herself. Florence consistently kept Eve indoors to avoid being detected. The twins finally saw each other as children through the windows of each other's houses, and realized they were twins. They started acting as one person. They both assumed the identity of "Hannah" and acted according to a strict set of rules. Whenever Eve wanted to interact with the outside world, she would put on a blond wig and act as "Hannah".

Eventually, Hannah met Simon and decided not to "share him like the others" with her sister. Apparently, Hannah had previous lovers who she shared with Eve. Things got more complicated when Hannah got pregnant and moved out of her parents' house. Eve tried to get pregnant to keep up the ruse but was unsuccessful. Hannah miscarried in the eighth month and, due to medical complications, was rendered infertile. A while after that, Hannah and Eve's parents died mysteriously. Eve, who was secretly living in the attic of their parents' house, moved out. Eve embraced her individuality by getting a tattoo and living alone. She started singing at a pub where she eventually met Simon who apparently did not recognize her identity as twin to Hannah. They slept together, and Eve got pregnant but did not tell Hannah or Simon. Later, she decided to tell Hannah about the baby but lied about the father. On Hanna and Eve's

birthday, Simon gave a handmade mirror to Hannah as a gift. Hannah then told him about her pregnant twin sister, and by his reaction realized that Simon was the father and ejected him from the house. Afterwards, Hannah and Eve had an intense argument and Eve decided to go to Glasgow to cool off. During that time, Hannah put on Eve's wig and clothing and talked to Simon who, mistaking her for Eve, gave her an identical mirror to the handmade one he gave Hannah. Simon worked at a mirror factory and sometimes crafted handmade mirrors. Simon then informed Hannah of his decision to leave her and to be with Eve. In the argument that followed Simon apparently beat Hannah disguised as Eve. Hannah then broke the mirror and cut Simon's throat, later claiming it was an accident.

After Eve returned, she found Simon's body and helped Hannah hide it. She then pretended to be Hannah and went to the police and reported that Simon was missing. She returned a few days later and told the police that she had found the body. Things got complicated when the police found hairs from Eve's wig on the body. At first, the woman being interviewed (the player does not know whether it is Hannah or Eve), denies having a twin and adheres to that story. In the last interview, however, a "lie detector" is used and reveals that it is, in fact, Eve who is being interviewed. Eve reveals the whole story in the last interview, asks for a lawyer, and claims that "all these stories we've been telling each other… [are] just that, stories". According to Eve in the last tape, Hannah has gone and is "never coming back".

CONCLUSION

This thesis examines the unique position of video games as an emerging and evolving medium of storytelling. Video games are both an extension of, and significantly different from other storytelling mediums. They continue earlier narratives but are different from traditional literary forms due to direct audience engagement. Consequently, this thesis acknowledges video games as yet another medium of storytelling and includes discussion of narrative forms and the ergodic aspects of video games. The six analyses in this thesis examine earlier literary traditions that contribute to the various games' narratives. The analyses also examine gameplay mechanics and how they affect storytelling functions.

The most unique property of video games as a medium of storytelling is their ergodic nature. Since video games demand nontrivial efforts from their players in order to deliver their narratives, they extend literary expression into new frontiers. This thesis shows how ergodics inform the narrative experience of players in video games. For example, the real narrative of *Darkest Dungeon* arises primarily from one innovative gameplay mechanic: the Affliction System. By introducing this mechanic, *Darkest Dungeon* demands players to make decisions that affect the narrative and morality of the game. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter III, rhizomatic games depend largely on game mechanics for storytelling. Games such as *Her Story* modify the delivery of their plots in order to help players create emergent narratives. The narratives of other rhizomatic games such as *Crusader Kings II* are constructed entirely by players using game mechanics since such games do not include any pre-scripted plotlines.

This thesis also shows how video game narratives often extend earlier literary forms by remediating previous narratives. These remediations include myths, folk tales, religious tales, plays, poems, historical nonfictions, and so on. For example, *Fallout 4* remediates ancient

narratives such as the religious story of the Seven Sleepers, the Arthurian story of the Fisher King, the folk tale featuring "Rip Van Winkle," as well as twentieth century science fiction novels such as Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot.* This thesis also demonstrates that, due to their free-play qualities, rhizomatic games do not always remediate earlier narrative forms. While such games may evoke certain literary genres, as does *Her Story* with the detective genre, their remediation depends on player decisions and cannot be pre-scripted. The significance of player decision making is especially apparent in this thesis's study of *Crusader Kings II.* In that game, players may *choose* to recreate history or remediate a historical tale, but the game itself does not have a pre-scripted plotline. The game does, however, feature game mechanics that enable players to weave their own stories.

The examination of video game formats (linear, branching, and rhizomatic) helps reveal how video games evolved as a storytelling medium. Video game storytelling began with linear games which featured predominantly romance quests and, starting in the late 1980s and early 1990s, shifted towards ironic and satiric stories that consider social and ethical dilemmas. Branching narrative video games underwent a similar shift from romantic quests to ironic and satiric ones. These games show more potential to explore themes of morality and social injustice since they provide challenging choices for players. In branching games, players can alter the outcome of the narrative and project *their own* morality onto the plot. Finally, the study of rhizomatic video games reveals how such games move beyond traditional storytelling structures. Due to their free-play qualities, rhizomatic games do not present any pre-scripted plotlines to players. Therefore, their narratives cannot be predicted and labeled as comic, romantic, ironic, satiric, or tragic. Rhizomatic game narratives depend upon player choices.

As mentioned before, video game narratives, especially branching ones, have shifted away from romance towards irony and satire. The branching structure of games such as *Fallout 4* allows players to shape the outcome of the game's narrative to their liking. *Fallout 4* satirizes social ills such as unethical pursuit of power and racial discrimination, while examining players' morality through its branching structure since players have the option to become oppressors or fight for the freedom of marginalized and enslaved newly-sentient synthetic humans. Similarly, *The Stanley Parable* utilizes its branching structure to highlight the lack of true player freedom, thereby satirizing video game precepts and engaging in self-parody. Linear video games can present satiric narratives as well. As shown in the discussion of *BioShock Infinite,* this game's plotline satirizes racial discrimination, religious extremism, American exceptionalism, and so on. However, branching video games seem to offer more engaging satires due to their higher ergodic levels.

This study also examines how all three video game formats can reveal player morality. As demonstrated by the examination of *Darkest Dungeon* and *Fallout 4,* linear and branching games *may* reflect players' morality depending on the degree of player empathy shown towards "NPCs [G]" (Non-Player Characters) in those games. This study also reveals how game mechanics can affect players' moral choices. In linear format games like *Darkest Dungeon,* a design paradox rewards immoral decisions and players are motivated to endanger NPCs. In *Darkest Dungeon,* even though players may *try* to remain empathetic towards their hired adventurers, the game mechanics make the use of empathy impossible if one wishes to complete the quest successfully.

Branching format games such as *Fallout 4* provide multiple morally charged options but do not push players towards any particular ethical choice. *Fallout 4* reflects players' morality by

letting players decide how to handle the core tension of the dystopian society, involving the life and freedom of synths, by choosing which armed faction to support. In *Fallout 4,* regardless of whether one fights for the freedom of synths or not, one must kill numerous NPCs. The morality of the game is skewed by game design regardless of which choice a player makes.

As mentioned before, rhizomatic games do not present any pre-scripted narratives. As a result, such games produce narrative forms arising from player choices. For example, in *Crusader Kings II,* players may reveal their morality through the *way* they recreate or change history. The game's mechanics include a design paradox similar to that of *Darkest Dungeon.* While one might *attempt* to avoid immoral actions such as genocide or ethnic cleansing, the game's design pushes players towards unethical actions. On the other hand, *Her Story* does not push players towards any particular action. Instead, the emergent narrative of this rhizomatic game is left entirely to players' choices and interpretations. Players may reveal a cultural or gender bias in the way they pursue the suspect in this remediated detective genre murder mystery. *Her Story* allows players to project their ideologies onto the game's narrative. Such ideologies may include misogyny and heteronormativity, expressed by any player's individual interpretation of *Her Story's* narrative. The assumptions that any player arrives at while playing this game may mirror that player's morality and cultural attitudes. This thesis argues that, regardless of the game formats and player engagements, video games are a rapidly emerging extension of literary expression.

While game formats, mechanics, ergodics, and morality are key topic areas in this thesis, there are still many other areas of research that could be pursued in greater depth. Early literary critics commented on the emergence of hybrid literary forms including tragicomic plays. This hybrid form in literary expression can be traced back to ancient Roman authors such as Plautus

(c. 200 BCE) and tragicomic plays such as the *Amphitryon* which mixes common mortals with kings and gods. Similarly, one could study, in greater detail, hybrid formats such as linear-rhizomatic or branching-rhizomatic video games. For example, a grand strategy rhizomatic game such as *Crusader Kings II* could present the option of re-enacting the life of a specific historical figure to players, thereby becoming a linear-rhizomatic game. Furthermore, a branching game such as *Fallout 4* could offer rhizomatic options where one could abandon the larger quest entirely and simply get involved with a free-play experience.

Alternately, environmental interpretations of video game narratives could prove beneficial due to the popularity and interactivity of the medium. Game designers have not yet realized the full potential of addressing environmental issues. Open world video games could potentially engage with ecological matters, but this area has yet to be fully explored by both game developers and game scholars. Environmental studies of video games could consider the ecological impacts of the video game industry, as well as the depiction and treatment of the environment in contemporary video games.

While some research has been conducted in the following areas, new studies could further pursue matters such as gender relations in game narratives and within the video game culture, race-relations including postcolonial considerations, and the financial aspects of the video game industry. Such examinations are common in the scholarly studies of existing literary works. However, video game narratives have not yet garnered a full range of critical inquiry. If, as this thesis argues, video games are a rapidly emerging extension of existing literary expression, then video game narratives should enjoy a broader, more dedicated scholarly and critical response. This thesis offers one such critical response.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Glossary

- Action-adventure (genre):

A video game genre that combines action games and adventure games. Action games aim to challenge players' skills through challenges such as combat. Adventure games focus on narratives that are driven mainly by exploration and puzzle-solving. Action-adventure games combine the two in different manners and forms. Some action-adventure games might lean more towards exploration while others might focus primarily on combat elements.

- Action role-playing (genre):

A subgenre of role-playing games which puts more focus on combat elements. In these games, players typically take direct control of their avatars' actions and use the available combat systems and mechanics to defeat their foes.

- Combat system:

Any game's set of rules and mechanics that shape the combat element of the game. Players' interactions with the combat elements of any game is defined by these systems as their avatars' abilities and vulnerabilities in combat are defined by the combat system.

- Crowdfunding (for video games)

The process in which people, not production companies, contribute the needed funds for developing a video game. Since the first decade of the 21st century, crowdfunding has become an important contributor to the development of indie games. Systems dedicated to crowdfunding

include the website *Kickstarter* which provides a video game section, as well as the now discontinued Greenlight System within the digital game distribution platform *Steam.*

- Cutscene:

cinematic scenes used in video games to advance the narrative. Generally, players lose control of their avatars during cutscenes and cannot interact with the game in any way. As such, developers typically gain complete control of the narrative of the game in cutscenes.

- Environmental Storytelling:

A form of video game storytelling whereby narrative and plot progression is presented through the world design of the game instead of through characters, dialogues, or scripted key plot points.

- First-person:

A video game point of view whereby players experience the game from the perspective of their avatars.

- First-person shooter (genre):

One of the most prominent video game genres especially in the first decade of the 21st century. This genre is defined by its first-person point of view and by its action elements that revolve around guns or other weapons. Typically, narrative progress in such games is dependent on players' success in action elements.

- Gameplay:

Video game systems, rules, and mechanics that define players' interactions with the game. Gameplay elements include a range of features including combat systems, puzzle solving, movement systems and rules, and so on.

- Gamification:

Turning any narrative, system, or process, digital or otherwise, into a game. Adding rules that must be followed to gain a promised reward can typically create a game out of non-game narrative forms, social media platforms, advertisement policies, and so on.

- Grand strategy (genre):

A video game genre in which players take control of a society instead of controlling only one avatar. Players must lead their society towards prosperity. Typically, in this genre, prosperity is not defined by the game and players are free to set their own goals for their societies.

- Hack and slash (genre):

A genre of video games centered around hand-to-hand combat, usually including melee weapons. Combat in these games is mostly fast paced. Hack and slash video games normally do not put much focus on their scripted plotlines. Instead, they aim to provide an enjoyable combat experience to players.

- In-game resources:

Items found by player avatars that may be used, consumed, or traded. Such items may include currency, weapons, consumables, and so on.

- Indie (game or company):

A game or company that is not affiliated with a major production company and does not have access to financial support from such large corporations.

- Interactive movie (genre):

Video games that use live action footage instead of animating characters, scenes, and settings.

- Level (area):

The space or setting available for exploration to players at any given moment they are engaging with the game.

- Level (status):

The position of video game characters within a system dictating their powers. In video games including such systems, player avatars typically begin at level 1, and strive to reach maximum level of power.

- Leveling up

When the abilities of a character in a game improve while progressing through the game. Characters may gain new abilities, equipment, or attributes.

- Loot:

Valuable in-game resources found by player avatars upon exploring the game world or defeating enemies.

- Mod (modification):

Mods are alterations to video games developed and distributed by players or fans of video games for free. These alterations change aspects of the game to fit players' wants and needs or to enhance and upgrade aspects of games.

- NPC (non-player character)

Any video game character who is not the player's avatar. Such characters may include enemies, allies, or neutral characters.

- Open world:

An approach to designing video game environments whereby an expansive environment is made available to players for explorations. Players are free to traverse such environments as they wish and can typically choose which quest or adventure to engage with next. Open world video games offer high levels of player agency.

- Party-based:

A subgenre of video games in which players control a group of characters instead of only one avatar. Players may have one avatar and control aspects of the rest of the party members' actions. Or their avatar might not be part of the party they control at all.

- Playthrough:

Each complete run of playing a video game from start to finish.

- Police procedural (genre):

Video games which emphasize on procedures typically used by the police in solving crimes.

- Procedurally generated:

Randomly constructed elements in video games. Such elements are created by artificial intelligence designed by game developers and may include areas, fights, characters, and so on. The random nature of this type of design helps create unique experiences for players.

- Roguelike (genre):

A video game genre with two main qualities: permanent character death and procedurally generated areas and battles. Named and modeled after the video game *Rogue* (1980).

- Role-playing games (RPGs, genre):

A genre in which players assume the role of a character and assume responsibility for the character's choices and actions. In role-playing video games, players are given more freedom in the development of their characters compared to other genres. This genre typically includes level up systems whereby characters gain experience as they continue their journey and gain new and better abilities.

- Stealth (genre):

A genre in which players rely primarily on remaining undetected to avoid or overcome their foes. Direct combat is typically deadly to players' avatars in stealth games.

- Top-down view:

  A video game point of view in which players control their avatars while observing them from above, giving a certain level of omniscience to players.

- Turn-based:

  A style of developing and controlling combat in video games in which players' avatars and enemies are assigned turns in combat and can only act on their turns.

- Walking simulator (genre):

  A video game genre focused on exploration and narrative. Walking Simulator video games generally do not include any combat elements. Instead, they require players to unravel the narrative through exploring an interactive environment. These games typically feature some degree of environmental storytelling

- Win/lose conditions:

  Conditions and rules by which players may complete a game and achieve a specific "goal" set for them by the game or fail to do so. Failing to reach the goal set by the game can either result in players quitting the game or in consequent tries to win.

Appendix B – Karl Jirgens Interview

Karl Jirgens on Satire: An Interview with Arash Hajbabaee (July 29, 2019, U Windsor)

A.H.: Several critics including Northrop Frye have commented on satiric literary form. Could you provide a brief definition of satire that might relate to video game narrative forms?

K.J.: That question suggests that video games are part of an emerging form of storytelling or what Gerald Vizenor would call "storying," and I concur. Nonetheless, it's still a difficult question because of the enormous breadth to the topic area. I'll offer a brief summary of a number of key features that are commonly found in nearly all satires. For any who wish to pursue this topic area, I'll say that I borrow my perceptions from a number of specialists, notably Northrop Frye and his *Anatomy of Criticism.* While I was an undergraduate at the University of Toronto, I had the good fortune of attending Dr. Frye's lectures. Other thinkers who are also helpful include Quintillian, and Mikhail Bakhtin (including his study *Rabelais and His World,* 1968). I find Linda Hutcheon's comments on irony to be revealing, especially if we remember that satire is a sub-set of irony (see; *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, 1994). Frye reminds us that irony can be understood as a parody of romance structures. Romances typically feature a protagonist on a worthy quest. Ironies and satires depict protagonists on questionable quests. The quests might be questionable because they're simply wrong-headed, or self-serving (unlike the noble romantic quest of romance). Or, they might be questionable because socio-political conditions have rendered all quests absurd to some degree because the world has become unjust, corrupt, or absurd. Also helpful is Henry Fielding's "Introduction" to his novel *Joseph Andrews* (1742), where he argues for a literary form that has not yet been entirely defined, but helpfully identifies some primary features of satire such as the critique of ridiculous

human behaviours including vanity, hypocrisy, affectation, and vice. Early specialists in satire

include Aristophanes, Horace, Juvenal, Chaucer, Cervantes, Swift, Voltaire, Sterne, Margaret

Cavendish, and Kafka, but they're among so many others that it's impossible to list the many

luminaries here. More recently, those briefly mentioned are joined by authors such as William S.

Burroughs, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., John Kennedy Toole, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Dorothy Parker,

Ben Okri, Salmon Rushdie, Thomas King, Fran Lebowitz, Jeanette Winterson, and Margaret

Atwood, to name only a non-representative handful.

Before summarizing the characteristics of three of the major forms of satire, I'll say that

all three types share one purpose. Satire generally aims at correcting human vice and folly by

revealing the absurdity or ridiculousness of such behaviour. The aim is to teach, sometimes

through laughter, and ideally to engage audiences in initiating desirable social reform. It helps to

keep in mind that there's a distinction between direct satire (usually 1st person narrative point of

view), and indirect satire (usually 3rd person narrative p.o.v.). Various critics expand on those

two approaches, they're somewhat self-explanatory, and do not enter into video game narratives

very much, so I won't dwell on them here.

So, of the three forms, I'll begin with Horatian satire (named after the Roman author,

Horace b. 65 BCE) where the personality of the narrator is genteel, tolerant and witty, prone to

laughing instead of growing impatient with human foolishness, even if it includes

pretentiousness and hypocrisy. Horatian satirists typically use informal language to amuse

readers concerning human absurdity (see; Leacock, Twain, or Pope in his "Moral Essays",

"Essay on Man", and, "Rape of the Lock," or Kurt Vonnegut Jr's. *Breakfast of Champions*).

In Juvenalian satire (named after the Roman writer, Juvenal b. 58 ACE) the narrator is

typically a serious moralist using a somewhat elevated or decorous style to critique or ridicule

vice and error even when they are dangerous. This style aims to evoke reader contempt and moral indignation when considering serious socio-political blunders. (See; Samuel Johnson's "London," 1738; Huxley's *Brave New World,* 1932*;* Orwell's *1984*, 1949; or Burgess' *Clockwork Orange,* 1962).

Menippean satire is structured after the Greek philosopher and cynic, Menippus (300 BCE). It's also called "Varronian" satire after his Roman imitator Varro (116 BCE). Frye suggest that this is also the satire of "Anatomy" (*Anatomy of Criticism*, 308-12), after major examples of the type such as Robert Burton's "Anatomy of Melancholy" (1621). Such satires are usually in prose form, but sometimes include sections of verse. Menippean satires typically feature a series of loosely connected dialogues (typically at social gatherings) in which groups of verbose oddballs, nit-pickers, literary types, and/or various specialists debate absurd perspectives (see; Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel,* 1564; Voltaire's *Candide,* 1759). Frye classifies Lewis Carroll's two books about Alice including *Alice in Wonderland* as near perfect Menippean satires.

A.H. So, what are some of the more prominent elements of satire?

K.J. All satires share similar characteristics. They begin with what can be called a "token fantasy" (some absurd situation) as well as wit and/or humour based on that fantasy. So, the "fantasy" could involve something like a sex-strike in ancient Greece (see; Aristophanes' *Lysistrata,* 411 BCE), or it could be about some post-apocalyptic society, or other society that has gone awry (e.g.; Zamyatin's *We,* 1921). Satires all critique individual human ridiculousness, and/or institutional absurdities as their objects of attack. They all use "wit" in a variety of ways including through language play (which can either be extremely serious, or light-hearted, depending on the *type* of satire). The range of rhetorical devices used in satires is lengthy, but

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some of the key figures of speech include euphemism, dysphemism, hyperbole, litotes, antiphrasis, circumlocution, anachronism, oxymoron, and so on Oscar Wilde's satiric language-play is among the finest. (See; *The Importance of Being Earnest,* 1895).

A.H.: Apart from those methods, what other stylistic techniques can be seen in satire?

K.J.: Satires often invert social-political hierarchies or show how social priorities have been turned upside down so that trivial things are made to seem important, and important matters are considered insignificant. Satires often provide anatomies or dissections of the socio-political conditions they depict. Digression is a common feature in all three satiric forms. Also, characters' attitudes are revealed as you progress through the storyline. Many satiric works parody earlier literary forms or archetypes. In text form, the satiric narrative voice can be *faux naif* or falsely naïve (as in works by Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, Thomas King, or Margaret Atwood), but the tone of voice in a video game is not nearly as apparent, and instead it helps to consider the perspective that the game's *designers* are forwarding. Nonetheless, the other features that I list earlier are all typically found in any satiric expressions, including those found in video games. All satires will feature an implicit moral standard, and all strive to enlighten us about our individual and institutional social weaknesses. At times like this, I remember the words of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn,* "It's troublesome to do right, and it ain't no trouble to do wrong." I hope this helps to begin answering the question.

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