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ABSTRACT

Situated at the interstices of game studies, adaptation scholarship, and literary theory, this dissertation puts forth a theoretical framework for effectively analyzing literary game adaptations (that is, playable digital or analog systems that are based upon a work or works of literature) as expressive intertextual systems which facilitate aesthetic experiences. By integrating contemporary game studies with filmic adaptation studies and literary theory, I argue that game adaptations allow us to see how games, adaptations, and indeed all texts can be productively conceived of as Barthesian networks of meaning: collections of interacting formal, narrative, intertextual, and contextual elements from which a user's experience arises. Doing so destabilizes the primacy of concepts that are so often used to justify hierarchical relationships between "high art" and popular culture, opening up new interpretations of texts which do not lend themselves to analysis via traditional literary or cinematic methodologies. Thinking of adaptations in terms of the systemized relationships between texts, intertexts, and the user rather than as merely derivative copies of a single "original" also redefines the classically hierarchical relationship between adaptations and their sources that has plagued adaptation studies discourse from its inception. Through my readings of a variety of digital and analog games based on William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Ryan North's gamebook *To Be or Not to Be*), J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (Beam Software's *Hobbit* text-adventure), Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (Storybrewers' tabletop roleplaying game *Good Society*), and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (Tracy Fullerton's contemplative digital "walking simulator" *Walden, a game*), I illustrate how thinking of texts as systems affords interpretatively productive play, encouraging users to reinterpret, revise, and remix culture to their own ends.

“PLAY THE BOOK AGAIN”: TOWARDS A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO GAME
ADAPTATION

by

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B.A., University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2015

M.Phil., Syracuse University, 2018

Dissertation

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Doctor of Philosophy in English.

Syracuse University

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Introduction:

Methodology and Metaphors

“When I go to the king, I shall send for you. You must come, and when you see the king has done what he wants with me, you are to say: ‘Tell me a story, sister, so as to pass the waking part of the night.’ I shall then tell you a tale that, God willing, will save us.”

-Tales of the Arabian Nights (Lyons 42)



Figure 1 – Z-Man Games’ Tales of the Arabian Nights

Despite it being one of my favorite board games, I will be the first to admit that the experience of playing Z-Man Games’ *Tales of the Arabian Nights* (2009) can be tedious (Figure 1). It begins straightforwardly enough for a storytelling game: players select a character from the collection of stories upon which the game is based (such as Aladdin, Sindbad, or Scheherazade herself) and take turns moving about a map of the medieval Islamic world in search of fame, fortune, and adventure. Each turn, players have an encounter with a person, creature, or obstacle which may earn them points required to win the game. The process of resolving these encounters, however, is as meticulous and arcane as any spell described in the literary *Tales*:



Figure 2a – Encounter Card

Figure 2b – Entity Matrix

Figure 2c – Reaction matrix and “Destiny Die”

1. On their turn, the active player draws an encounter card, reading one of the numbers on it that matches their position on the board and the current game state (Figure 2a).
2. A second player (the “Reader”) flips to an associated matrix in the weighty “Book of Tales,” rolling dice to determine the nature of the entity the player-character encounters as well as the “Reaction Matrix” to which it relates (Figure 2b).
3. The active player then chooses one of eight actions to take in regard to this entity from a specific list on their character sheet, such as “Pray,” “Attack,” “Rob,” or “Avoid.”
4. By cross-referencing the active player’s choice with the entity from step 2 on a particular matrix on a “Reaction Matrix” insert, a *third* player determines which paragraph in the “Book of Tales” relates to this outcome, represented by yet another number (Figure 2c).
5. While the Reader begins to flip through the “Book of Tales” in search of this paragraph, the active player rolls a special “Destiny Die,” which can modify the paragraph number by plus or minus one, further randomizing the result.
6. The Reader finally reads the paragraph associated with that number aloud, relaying a short narrative of what happens to the active player’s character and announcing the in-game consequences of their choice.

While this ritual of randomization makes it highly unlikely that any of the 2600 encounters printed in the “Book of Tales” will appear twice in the same game, it also tends to make gameplay slow, unpredictable, and narratively incoherent. A player’s choice to “Avoid” an Old Man, for example, can result in their character becoming scorned for their insolence (Figure 3), getting chased by a ghoul, or stumbling into the schemes of a wicked Vizier (requiring the Reader to flip to yet another paragraph) depending on the value of the “Destiny Die” (Goldberg 108). Random arrays of outcomes like this not only invalidate any strategic decisions the player makes (only one of the above scenarios awards the player any points, but it is difficult to say which);¹ they also undermine any narrative or tonal consistency when players attempt to weave them together with the equally random encounters of previous turns. As a result, most of those I can convince to play a round of

Tales of the Arabian Nights with me find both the gameplay and

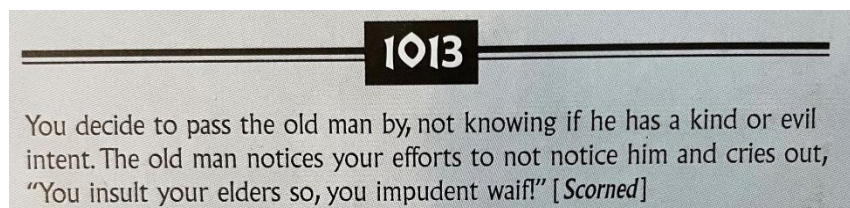


Figure 3 – One possible narrative outcome from the “Book of Tales”

the stories it produces to be incoherent, aimless, and far too drawn out for a typical game night.

But while the clunky encounter-generation system of Z-Man Games’ *Tales* may hinder its performance as a modern storytelling game, those very same mechanics make it captivating as an adaptation of the literary work upon which it is based. Granted, none of the sessions I have played in has resulted in any of the canonical adventures I grew up reading: I have seen games where Sindbad the Sailor never sets foot on a ship, and my Aladdin has traversed the entire map multiple times without a glimpse of his magic lamp. But while any given game session fails to adhere to the plot of its source text, the gameplay itself resonates deeply with the chaotic narrative *mélange* that is the literary *Tales*. As a collection of Arabian, Persian, Indian, Mediterranean, and Chinese folktales compiled, censored, and expanded upon by 13th century

Islamic scholars (*Kitab Alf Layla wa-Layla*), 18th century French archaeologists (Antoine Galland's *Les Mille et Une Nuits*), and 19th century British adventurers (Richard Francis Burton's *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights and a Night*) among dozens of others, the literary *Tales* are far from tonally consistent (Borges 565). The stories in any version of the text are all nested within one another, often lurching from bawdy romance to Aesopian fable to fantastic travelogue in a matter of paragraphs. The characters in these tales are often at the mercy of uncontrollable forces rather than heroic masters of their fates: the literary Sindbad, after all, is driven by wanderlust and the Aladdin of most versions merely stumbles into his good fortunes. In fact, arguably the only character with a consistently focused narrative direction is the narrator, Scheherazade, who (like the player entrusted with reading from the "Book of Tales" each turn) is tasked with ritualistically weaving these fantastic and disjointed stories together in order to enthrall her captor and delay her seemingly inevitable end. If these tales seem improvised, aimless, or long-winded, the frame narrative implies they are *meant* to be, both in the book and in the game. In presenting an extended ritual for generating snippets of fantastic stories, Z-Man Games' *Tales of the Arabian Nights* essentially turns its players into individual Scheherazades, telling meandering tales of hapless heroes in hopes that by the time the night is over (and someone has earned their points) their audience cares more about the fun they had listening than the prospect of winning. And while a digital app exists to streamline the process (Voter Software 2017), flipping through, pouring over, and embellishing upon the text of a weighty tome is all part of the experience.

In an attempt to better understand objects like Z-Man Games' *Tales of the Arabian Nights*, this project draws on theories of games, adaptations, and textuality to present a framework for analyzing games based on other media texts (primarily print literature). It asks

how game adaptations operate differently from adaptations in other media, and what these operations might mean for our understanding of adaptation theory. It asks how game adaptations might help us read source texts differently, and how games based on those texts might help us understand how to analyze games. Most importantly, it asks what game studies, adaptation scholarship, and theories of game design might learn from each other if brought to bear on a subject that unites all three, and what such a perspective might in turn tell us about how texts are read, represented, and reconfigured. While the following pages provide some answers to these questions, the goal of this project is not to dictate what ought to be. Instead, it sketches a perspective useful to those working at the interstices of games and adaptations by bridging the gaps between the scholarly fields surrounding each subject while calling attention to the generally understudied textual phenomenon of game adaptation, which has commonly been dismissed as not fit for critical inquiry due to the perceived frivolity of games or the supposed derivativeness of adaptations. But in presenting a way to read these game adaptations as systems which facilitate experiences that resonate their source texts, this dissertation is invested in the same project that game studies scholars and adaptation theorists have been pursuing in their respective fields: to encourage others to pay attention to often-marginalized aspects of popular culture and to approach them from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Game Adaptations in the Academy

While they have not been rigorously studied as aesthetic objects, board, card, and video games based upon other texts are not a new phenomenon. As early as 1852, a bookseller by the name of Vilen S. Parkhurst had designed a card game based upon the enormously popular *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which players attempted to collect and keep certain “families” of characters

together in a game reminiscent of “Go Fish” (Kelley 127). Of course, the artifacts that characterize the form in the popular consciousness today began in the twentieth century with games that borrowed from popular children’s media at the time, most of which were aimed at families and younger audiences. Radio and comic book heroes Dick Tracy and the Lone Ranger each inspired multiple board games during the early part of the century, for example, as did the many animated characters that Disney created from the 1930s onward. The success of tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) like *Dungeons and Dragons* in 1974 inspired a whole new genre of game adaptations aimed at a slightly older audience and which borrowed from a variety of media franchises. While most of these TTRPG adaptations drew from transmedial fantasy and science-fiction genres such as *Flash Gordon and the Warriors of Mongo* (Fantasy Games Unlimited 1977) and *Star Trek: Adventure Gaming in the Final Frontier* (Heritage Models 1978), there were some (generally unsuccessful) attempts to adapt other media properties into a playable form (as was the case with Simulation Publications’ infamous 1980 commercial failure *Dallas: The Television Roleplaying Game*). At the same time, the rise of digital gaming in arcades, consoles, and personal computers throughout the 80s and 90s gave game developers and savvy media executives even more opportunities to adapt their properties into playable forms. Although this led to some innovative and well-received games such as Konami’s *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* arcade game (1989) or Westwood Studios’ *Dune II: Battle for Arrakis* (1992), a glut of poorly produced games from *E.T.* (Atari 1982) to *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Advanced Communication Company 1988) to *Superman 64* (Titus Interactive 1999) gave games based upon popular movies, comics, books, and television franchises a reputation as being boring, buggy, or one-dimensional “cash grabs” rather than compelling gameplay experiences.

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century (from which most of the case studies in this dissertation project are drawn), the reputation and cultural relevance of game adaptations are showing signs of change. Part of this is due to the growing influence of games in the contemporary media ecosystem: video game revenues have been surpassing box-office ticket sales in the US since 2004 (Nichols 132), and the Entertainment Software Association has estimated that as many as 65% of American adults played video games on a regular basis in 2019 (ESA 3). At the same time, an influx of European board games and accessible crowd-funding sites such as Kickstarter have ushered in a “board game renaissance,” increasing the demand for ever-more complex and innovative analog games that were once seen as too niche (see Hall, Graham). In order to reach this more discerning base of gaming consumers, developers cannot afford to sell games based on their box art alone; in order to compete in a marketplace increasingly characterized by transmedial narrative franchises and innovative interactive experiences, game adaptations have had to become compelling products on their own. Nearly every major televisual and cinematic release from HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) to Marvel’s *Avengers* franchise (2008-2019) has an associated game or games alongside it, many of which expand the worlds of these (already adapted) fictional universes well beyond the bounds of their original plots, settings, and characters and introduce innovative mechanics that resonate with the properties on which they are based. As crowd-funding websites, university game design programs, and ever cheaper development tools continue to swell the number of independent games of all kinds being produced, even niche game adaptations (like those based on literary works) will no doubt continue to become more common in the coming years.

Despite the long history and contemporary growth of the form, much of the existing scholarship regarding game adaptations frame them in a wider industrial context, exploring how

games based on popular media properties relate to the social, ideological, and economic ecologies of transmedia franchising. Marsha Kinder's influential 1991 book *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games* is a case in point. Kinder describes video game franchise tie-ins as part of what she calls supersystems – intertextual networks of television shows, video games, and other media objects focused around a popular culture figure or a group of figures (Kinder 122). Board and video games act as particularly engaging entry points into these systems in that they prepare children to participate in consumerist society by “assuring young customers that they themselves form the nucleus of their own personal entertainment system, which in turn is positioned within a larger network of popular culture” (125). Henry Jenkins expands upon these ideas in *Convergence Culture*, which examines the ways in which the relationship between industries and audiences have been changing in an increasingly participatory media ecosystem. Jenkins discusses games based on works in other media as potential parts of transmedia storytelling, or the attempt to create “stories that unfold across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world” that is a supposedly “more integrated approach to franchise development” than the creation of merchandise to prop up a single ur-text (Jenkins 293). Kinder's industrial supersystems and Jenkins' top-down conception of transmedia storytelling have been further explored by later scholars like Colin B. Harvey and Derek Johnson, who have highlighted the creative (rather than economic or psycho-social) potential inherent in video games and other products that do not necessarily contribute to a coherent transmedia narrative.

As important and compelling as these studies are, their large theoretical scopes and focus on new media still leave many aesthetic questions about game adaptations unanswered because they rarely (if ever) engage in sustained analysis of any particular game. Although Kinder briefly

describes a handful of Super Nintendo titles to make a point about the “oedipal dimension” of the medium (Kinder 104) and Jenkins sketches the plot details of Shiny Entertainment’s *Enter the Matrix* (2003) to show how its protagonists fit into a larger transmedia story (Jenkins 124-125), neither spend much time discussing how these games’ mechanics, aesthetics, and overall design contribute to their meaning as texts in and of themselves. Many of those studies that do examine game adaptations more closely – such as Robert Alan Brookey’s *Hollywood Gamers* (2010) or articles within Gretchen Papazian and Joseph Michael Sommers’ anthology *Game On, Hollywood!* (2013) – retain Kinder’s and Jenkins’ focus on the relationships between commercial video games and popular film or television franchises rather than addressing the extant cross-pollination between a wide range of media sources and game genres outside of this dyad. The much remarked upon synergy between the film and video game industries becomes a boon for these projects, but the same relationship can obscure equally interesting questions about how games of all types can shift our understanding of how adaptation works.²

An example of some of the negative results of this focus on commercial films and games may be found in Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation*. While Hutcheon’s inclusive framework is able to accommodate many productive perspectives for “treating adaptations *as adaptations*” and is thus rightfully influential in contemporary adaptation scholarship (not to mention this dissertation), it falls somewhat short in its discussion of games (6). Hutcheon broaches the idea of studying game adaptations alongside print and celluloid versions of texts by including “interacting” as a valid “mode of engagement” by which stories are adapted alongside the more traditionally adaptable “telling” and “showing” modes (22). Of primary interest to her is how and to what degree these modes engage readers in the stories at hand:

All three modes are arguably ‘immersive,’ though to different degrees and in different ways: for example, the telling mode (a novel) immerses us through imagination in a

fictional world; the showing mode (plays and films) immerses us through the perception of the aural and the visual. . .the participatory mode (videogames) immerses us physically and kinesthetically (22-23).

She goes on to explain that while the acts of perception and interpretation associated with the telling or showing modes are not passive by any means, the physical engagement with a story and its world afforded by the participatory mode “is certainly active in a different way” (23). As a result, Hutcheon claims that “what is often most significant for videogames is the adapted heterocosm, the spectacular world of digital animation the player enters,” made all the more viscerally real by “the visual and audio effects” accompanying player engagement with this world (51). While some aspects of the participatory mode are expanded upon in the newest edition of Hutcheon’s book in an epilogue by Siobhan O’Flynn, most of the discussion involves applying Hutcheon’s framework to transmedia franchises and interactive children’s books and does not affect her framing of game adaptations (200).

Although Hutcheon describes objects like theme park rides and virtual reality environments (13), an (uncited) *Pride and Prejudice* “dice game” (50), unspecified “CD-ROM and Web site kinds of ‘interactive storytelling’” (51), and hypertext fiction (135) as being technically included within the participatory mode, she seems to base much of her discussion of the mode on a particular type of mass-market video game. These games – of which she mentions *The Die Hard Trilogy* (1996), *Toy Story 2: Buzz Lightyear to the Rescue* (1999) and *The Godfather* (2006) – are described as following a three-act structure similar to the films on which they are based: “The introductory material, often presented in what are called ‘movie cut-scenes,’ is the first act; the second is the core gameplay experience; the third is the climax, again often in filmed cutscenes” (13). While this might be true of many contemporary mass-market console video games (especially those released at the time of her writing), Hutcheon’s

description of a visually immersive three-act structure is not characteristic of the diversity of game genres (digital or otherwise) which have formed the basis for game adaptations over the years, nor does it reflect of the increasingly influential game projects produced by independent developers. In fact, framing all interactive experiences in the context of cut-scenes and three-act structures de-emphasizes the expressive power of game mechanics in favor of graphical immersion, which actually turns out to be her point: “Although there has been a long debate recently about whether interactivity and storytelling are at odds with one another, what is more relevant in a game adaptation is the fact that players can inhabit a known fictional, often striking, visual world of digital animation” (13). Oddly enough, the participatory mode as theorized by Hutcheon seems to privilege the mode of immersive “seeing” over “interacting,” implicitly discounting board games, tabletop roleplaying games, text adventures, and any “non-cinematic” gameplay experience as they do not exhibit the “more relevant” aspects of game adaptation.

What is needed, this project contends, is a framework for discussing and analyzing game adaptations that takes into account not only commonly theorized categories (such as economically motivated tie-in products or commercial video games based on popular transmedia franchises) but games that exhibit a diversity in genre, source text, and contexts of production. To that end, the games I have chosen to use as case studies for this project are based not on popular film or television properties but on works of print literature. The reasons for this are threefold. First, a focus on literary as opposed to primarily screen-based sources emphasizes the non-visual ways that games of all types (digital or non-digital) make meaning. Instead of asking, as Hutcheon does, how a game adaptation can make a famous movie scene more viscerally “real” through immersive digital animation, one might ask how a game’s design might allow players to experience a character’s internal anxieties or understand the often-invisible forces that

shape the course of events in a storyworld. Secondly, book-to-game adaptations are somewhat insulated from (or at least have a different relationship to) the profit motives that often drive game adaptations of big-budget franchises. This is not to say that economics are not a factor in any of these titles – indeed, to varying degrees all of the games I discuss in this project were produced to make a profit – but only that many of the adapters can afford to be less artistically conservative in their interpretations of their source material due to the absence of corporate contracts, copyright restrictions, and the need to cater to a massive audience. The absence of such pressures (or at least a relaxing of them) can lead to often more liberal approaches to adaptation which cater to different audiences and emphasize different goals than adaptations of massive popular franchises might. Finally, a focus on book-to-game adaptations positions this project at the intersection of not only adaptation studies, game scholarship, and game design, but also literary studies. Aside from the potentially productive theoretical consequences of this confluence, bringing literature into the conversation regarding games and adaptations can also serve as a way of fostering further interdisciplinarity by presenting humanists who are less familiar with media studies a formal framework for approaching game adaptations.

While a detailed explanation of this framework – which I am calling *a systems approach to game adaptation* – and how it might be applied is a task for the following chapters, a sketch will suffice for now. The project contends that game adaptations can be productively conceived

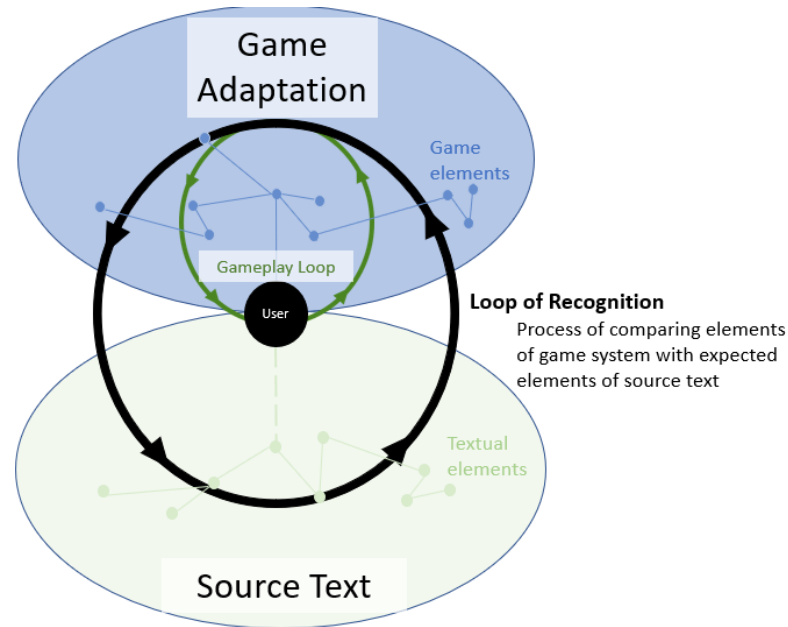


Figure 4 – A game adaptation as a dynamic intertextual system

of as dynamic systems of interconnected narrative, visual, and mechanical elements designed to elicit aesthetic experiences which emerge from their relationships to particular intertexts (Figure 4). Although anyone can approach an adaptation as a text in and of itself, it cannot be treated *as an adaptation* without some knowledge of the source text; a text cannot operate as an adaptation without a user to recognize at least some of the intertextual associations it is making, just as a game does not operate without a user to set gameplay into motion. Because game designers cannot ever fully predict their audience's knowledge of the source material or the choices they will make during play, game adaptations often rely on indirect design rather than strict fidelity to evoke (or reinterpret) their source texts. As a result, the act of gameplay can be made to resonate with the experience of a text's protagonist (or its reader), deconstruct character motivations and narrative conventions, and even allow users to investigate the philosophical or thematic systems underlying a particular work without requiring players to recreate a given plot. The aesthetic experience of engaging with a game adaptation involves simultaneously enacting the mechanics of the gameplay loop while constantly comparing the game with one's understanding of its

textual source(s), a process that has the potential to be as interpretatively productive as it is innately pleasurable to engage in.

Rather than being merely tie-in products or immersive re-creations of familiar stories, then, this project presents game adaptations as texts which encourage users to engage in practices of comparative reading that form the basis of textual interpretation, actively making connections between texts and the formal and narrative conventions, influential intertexts, and historical contexts from which any text draws meaning. This could easily be said to be true of all adaptations, as the act of making a source text explicit encourages comparative reading in and of itself, but game adaptations make these interlocking systems of meaning more explicit due to the fact that games operate as systems themselves. In addition to framing adaptations as dynamic systems of meaning that depend on a user's active interpretation of an adaptation with its source, game adaptations also provide an opportunity to explore the various ways in which games can express ideas through gameplay mechanisms. As mentioned above, this is particularly useful for introducing students already trained in the literary humanities to the concepts of game analysis, especially when using games based on canonical literature. Finally, a systems approach to game adaptation can encourage scholars to investigate how literature itself can act as a system, fields of possibility for characters that are shaped (but not constrained) by conventions that afford certain interpretations. At the very least, such a perspective is aimed to encourage others to continue to investigate games, adaptations, and game adaptations with the rigor that they merit.

Methodological Precursors

While the topic of game adaptation as aesthetic process is far from well-trod ground at this point, this dissertation project would not be possible without the contributions of other

scholars focusing on the intersections of games, adaptations, and literary theory. Aside from a handful of articles and book chapters on the subject,³ the most influential and most extensive work regarding game adaptations is Paul Booth's 2015 monograph *Game Play*. In it, Booth takes a serious look at board games based on popular media franchises from *Game of Thrones* to *Doctor Who*, which he describes as "paratextual board games" rather than the commercial (and often maligned) moniker of "licensed board games" (4). His case studies include descriptions of both filmic and non-filmic sources for these game adaptations, including Robert Kirkman's *Walking Dead* comics and the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft. Booth's work is also remarkable in its exclusive focus on (and persuasive readings of) non-digital ludic artifacts. In so doing, Booth calls attention to board games as sites of meaning which are both independent from and inextricably linked to our understanding of other texts, objects whose performances of a media franchise "reflect cultural concerns that map onto the media landscape in unique and informative ways" (3). The current project's mix of formal and intertextual analyses of games certainly follows in Booth's methodological footsteps, and his accessible and perceptive list of fifteen "principles of paratextual board games" will prove to inform some of this project's analysis of non-digital games (16-17). However, this project differs from Booth slightly in its inclusion of digital and tabletop roleplaying games as well as its more open conceptualization of adaptation. While Booth does bring up adaptation at multiple points in his work, he frames it as meant to merely "emulate the plot of another work" (90) in a way that "closes off interpretation" (176), a definition that is not consistent with contemporary understandings of adaptation as I will describe in chapter 1. Rather than adopt Booth's distinction between "transmediation" (adapting the pathos of a work rather than the plot [90]) and "ludic interaction" (the "back-and-forth construction of meaning between paratextual game and original text" [179]), this project

considers both concepts as part and parcel of adaptations when considered as a complex system. In other words, while this project's theorization of game adaptations is generally compatible with Booth's readings of paratextual board games, I will be utilizing a more expansive view of the term "adaptation" in order to better reflect the trend of contemporary adaptation scholarship.

In its attempt to offer a new perspective on textual analysis through examinations of atypical texts, this dissertation could also be seen as an extension of the theoretical framework Espen Aarseth sets out in *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997). In this seminal work of modern game studies, Aarseth calls attention to contemporary literary theory's inability to analyze or adequately account for what he calls "ergodic literature," works in which "non-trivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1). To better include these texts within academic study – which include digital text-based adventures and branching hypertext narratives as well as print works such as the *I Ching* and the poetic experiments of the French literary collective Oulipo – Aarseth calls for a new perspective that views texts not as chains of signifiers, but as "mechanical device[s] for the production and consumption of verbal signs" (21). For Aarseth, this textual machine – a "cybertext" – arises from the interplay of verbal signs, a material medium, and a (human) operator rather than the "traditional" sender-message-receiver model of communication (21). The functional differences between these three elements, for Aarseth, give rise to a large diversity of traditional textual categories (novels, poems, biographies, etc.) as well as what he calls "ergodic literature:" computer programs, tarot cards, and other texts which involve non-trivial effort on the part of the reader to complete (1). Crucially, then, "cybertexts" are not classes of text, but rather "a perspective on all forms of textuality, a way to expand the scope of literary studies to include phenomena that are today perceived as outside of, or marginalized by, the field of literature" (18). A systems approach to

adaptation would aim to do for adaptation studies what Aarseth's cybertext does for literary study by framing adaptations as closer to "textual machines" than linear chains of signifiers and emphasizing the role of the user in the process of intertextual recognition.

Aside from a difference in disciplinary context, my project differs from Aarseth's in its focus on elements outside of the three he puts forth as the core of "textual machinery." In addition to a text's material medium, verbal signs, and operator (or "user," as they will be described here) the approach to game adaptations discussed in this project calls attention to non-verbal signs, their formal arrangement or construction, and the connection these forms have to real-world systems in which a given text is situated. To that end, my framework also draws upon Caroline Levine's reframing of literary formalism in *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015). Levine proposes that in their attempts to either explain or dismantle totalizing worldviews, literary scholars have neglected to analyze how a variety of intersecting aesthetic and sociopolitical patterns structure our experience of the world. For Levine, the collisions between these portable and replicable *forms* – a term she defines as "an arrangement of elements – an ordering, patterning, or shaping" (3) – ought to be examined inside and outside of literature in order to understand how they operate. Levine goes on to emphasize that a focus on affordances, which she renders as "the potential uses or actions" latent in these forms, allows scholars to make claims about the relationship between literary form and narrative content in a way that neither totalizes nor minimizes the expressive power of any given form (6). My understanding of adaptations as systems of elements connected to larger networks of intertexts and contexts echoes Levine's attention to the bonds between formal structures inside and outside of literature and expands Aarseth's model of cybertext to include interactions between forms of all kinds rather than just verbal signs and material media.

Perhaps the revised theory of textuality that most closely resembles the project at hand can be found in Ian Bogost's *Unit Operations: An Approach to Video Game Criticism* (2006), which presages Levine's call for an attention to the interaction between units of meaning. For Bogost, any text can be read as "a configurative system, an arrangement of discrete, interlocking units of expressive meaning" which interact to create meaningful aesthetic experiences (ix). Too often, he claims, literary and philosophical analysis focuses on trying to apply universalizing structures to these systems as a whole to make claims about the narrative output of a textual system ("system operations") rather than focusing on the meanings that emerge from the "succinct, discrete, referential, and dynamic" interactions between individual units within that system ("unit operations"). This effectively sidesteps game studies' narratology/ludology "debate" (which I will discuss in the next chapter) by positioning narrative as one possible result of unit operations, not merely the final object of analysis; plot matters less than the particular unit operations that express meaning. His examples of this include the unit operation of "waiting" in the movie *The Terminal*'s many "units," or the "chance encounter" as it is expressed in the unit operations within Charles Baudelaire's language, Jean-Pierre Jeunet's film *Amelie* (2001), and Will Wright's game *The Sims 2: Hot Date* (2001). While one could criticize that Bogost uses a glut of philosophy, semiotics, and literary theory to essentially rearticulate the concept of "theme," the understanding of texts as configurative systems can be useful when in the right disciplinary context. I contend that this context is adaptation studies, which rearranges and repurposes a variety of individual units across media into systems from which meaningful experiences emerge.

In presenting a framework that draws an analogy between texts and systems, this project is also representative of the theoretical framing that often occurs in adaptation scholarship. In an

effort to make productive claims about how adaptations operate, adaptation scholars have long been in the habit of creating what linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have called “structural metaphors” – perspectives that structure our experience of adaptations in ways that can make new concepts, issues, and texts visible to the scholars who study them (14). As I will discuss in Chapter 1, much of adaptation theory involves coming up with structural metaphors for the relationships between adaptations and their sources that might dethrone the dominant one: that of a source text as scripture or progenitor to which the adaptation may be “faithful” to or “betray” based on their “fidelity” to the source’s plot. Hutcheon’s three forms of engagement alluded to earlier (showing, telling, interacting) combats the fidelity metaphor by attempting to put all modes of telling a story on an equal playing field, like vehicles used to see different aspects of the same space (Hutcheon 23). Robert Stam’s framing of adaptations as “readings” or “interpretations” of other works highlights the similarities between adaptation and other forms of cultural dialogism as they occur across time periods and cultures (Stam *Literature Through Film* 4-5). Other structural metaphors are more evocative than categorical: adaptation has been variously described in terms of biological evolution and mutation (Hutcheon 31, Stam *Literature and Film* 3), as a physical journey across time and medium (Bruhn, Gjelsvik, and Hanssen 2), and even as the ghost of one text haunting another (Catania). I find that even the briefest of these structural metaphors can prove to be incredibly useful for any sort of scholarship, both as aids for understanding (in that they can make often obtuse academic theory tangible) and as primers for productive interpretation (as they encourage readers to make connections they would not otherwise see).

While careful readers will find all of these perspectives echoed in the following pages, there are two specific structural metaphors drawn from adaptation scholarship that are

particularly relevant and instructive for the current study. The first is that of Julie Grossman, whose monograph *Literature, Film, and their Hideous Progeny* turns the fidelity metaphor on its head by celebrating adaptations as reanimated Frankensteinian constructs, stitched together from various sources and genres while remaining inextricably linked to their creator(s). For Grossman, every adaptation might be considered as a “‘monster’ birthed with difficulty. . . isolated from its predecessors because it is born of new concerns, new desires to express ideas in a different medium” while still bearing an uncanny likeness to a recognizable source (1-2). Like harvested flesh pulled over an unnatural skeletal frame – an image Grossman more tastefully renders as a “vastly stretched tarp or canvas” – adaptations thus exhibit “elastextity,” the capability of cultural artifacts to be “extended beyond themselves, merging their identities with other works of art that follow and precede them” (2). As such, though adaptations may be initially difficult to look at, doing so can “train our critical eye on cultural progeny rather than origins” and call attention to the ways in which “creative works are in dialogue with previous texts and self-conscious about the multitudinous influences on any one work of art” (3). I find this structural metaphor compelling and resonant with the ideas addressed here; in fact, this project could easily be seen as furthering the investigation of “elastextity” by stretching the concept over a form Grossman does not address (games) and stitching the user themselves into the fold. However, I have avoided applying Grossman’s framework here not only because I want to do some theoretical “mad science” of my own, but also because I want to give game adaptations room to breathe. After all, as Grossman’s case studies mostly consist of the filmic and theatrical avant-garde, it is no surprise her metaphor encourages us to see adaptations as behaving “how the avant-garde functions, reorienting our practices and introducing us to new forms of artistic being” (3). This project wonders instead what insight is to be gained from a structural metaphor

that is derived from and applied to the expressive systems that are games. As we will see in the coming chapters, taking theories of games as a starting point inevitably leads to different assumptions on (for example) the relative importance of narrative to an aesthetic experience, the role of the user in the experience of reading, and the nature of authorship, all of which may in turn contribute to our understanding of what adaptations are and how they operate

The second structural metaphor that bears discussion in light of this project's goals is one presented by Kyle Meikle in his 2017 contribution to the *Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies* during a discussion of Hutcheon's "participatory mode" of adaptation in contemporary culture. Due to its uncanny similarities with language and concepts that I will be unpacking in this dissertation, it is worth quoting Meikle at length:

The history of adaptation, after all, is one in which audiences have had to adapt to "new information interfaces developed by artists," to navigate "new information structures," to modify their behaviors as novels are updated into plays, or plays are updated into films, or films are updated into videogames. For what is every adaptation that follows from an earlier source, if not an update? At a minimum, Hutcheon and O'Flynn offer adaptation scholars a renewed interest in the listeners, players, readers, and viewers—in short, the users—of adaptations. Adaptation is an operating system (Adaptation OS) through which those users develop new ways of organizing information across various media, texts, and user interfaces. And only greater attention to the ways that adaptation operates within and outside convergence culture can answer Hutcheon's question of whether adaptation scholars are facing a "transitional time" or a "totally new world" (xix), an entirely new operating system (Convergence OS) or an update of the old (Adaptation OS X). . . . Rethinking the difference between old and new media as one of degree, not kind, leaves scholars better positioned to rethink the difference between adaptation and other intertextual and transmedia practices as one of kind, not degree (546)

Although his interest in Jenkins' convergence culture places our projects at slightly different scales, this passage presages many of the arguments in the following pages. The systems approach to adaptation I set forth here does focus on the centrality of the user's experience as they "navigate 'new information structures,'" and my theorization of adaptation as a process rather than a product certainly blurs the line between kind and degree in regards to adaptation

and other intertextual and transmedia practices. As was the case with Grossman's "elastextity," one could read my dissertation as being compatible with (or even a direct expansion of) Meikle's structural metaphor.

However, while it is tempting to whole-heartedly take up Meikle's "operating system" metaphor – a framework which is notably adopted by the editor of the *Oxford Handbook* when he labels the eras of adaptation scholarship along the lines of "Adaptation 1.0" and "Adaptation 2.0" in his introduction (Leitch 2) – framing it in these terms loses much of the sense of dynamic interaction that is central to both my theorization of texts as systems as well as my understanding of the nature of scholarship. My purpose in detailing a systems approach to adaptation is not to execute some sort of blanket "software update" to adaptation studies discourse as Meikle's (admittedly brief) description of his metaphor implies; instead, the texts-as-systems metaphor sits alongside a great number of other metaphors in adaptation scholarship – adaptation as paraphrase, travel, evolution, "hideous progeny," operating system, or any number of others – as a lens through which one may see the field. It is the dynamic interactions between these perspectives (and the texts they are applied to) that comprise scholarship, just as it is the dynamic interactions between texts, intertexts, and users that comprise an adaptation. As the following pages will show, it is this dynamism that makes the study of games as systems fascinating and useful to adaptation scholarship, not just the structures that give rise to it; to think otherwise is to mistake the arcane rules of something like *Tales of the Arabian Nights* with the experiences that they generate. My hope is that this approach to game adaptations and the other structural metaphors to which it gives rise may open up avenues for the study of not only more game adaptations, but adaptations of all kinds, and allow scholars and audiences alike to better engage (and play) with texts and culture.

Delineation of Chapters

The following dissertation is divided into three chapters and a conclusion, each of which utilizes a particular literary text or corpus and at least one prominent game adaptation of that text/corpus to construct and illustrate a systems approach to analyzing literary game adaptations. While each of the chapters also include interpretations of the literary source material for each game (frequently supported by literary criticism of that specific work), this is generally secondary to the analysis of the game adaptation's interpretation of its source text as well as the aspect of the systems approach which the whole system exemplifies. In selecting the primary case studies, I attempted to cover a range of game genres and contexts of production – a digitally published “choose-your-own-adventure” gamebook, a commercially successful text adventure game, a fan-funded tabletop roleplaying game, and a graphically immersive “walking simulator” designed in an academic setting and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities – in order to demonstrate the applicability of the approach to multiple kinds of game adaptations. That said, the case studies contained here are in no way representative of the long history of game adaptation alluded to above, especially as most of the games discussed were published in the first two decades of the twentieth century and all were created by English-speaking designers. As it is impossible to ever cover everything one wants to in a single document (especially when studying adaptations), I have decided to make primary concerns of this project aesthetic and theoretical rather than historical or sociopolitical (though the latter concerns certainly appear throughout.)

Chapter 1 is perhaps the most theory-heavy of the chapters, as it details the general structure of the systems approach to game adaptation as well as an overview of the major

literary, ludic, and adaptation-studies theories which influence it. It begins with a discussion of textual identity, drawing on literary theorists such as Roland Barthes and Gerard Genette in order to contextualize contemporary definitions of “text” and justify the use of formal categorization as a way of opening up rather than closing off interpretation in a post-post-structuralist context. The chapter then moves on to a discussion of adaptation, defining the term in relation to adaptation studies’ struggles against fidelity criticism and its relationships to other intertextual processes such as genre. By bringing adaptation scholars such as George Bluestone and Linda Hutcheon into conversation with Rick Altman’s conceptions of genre formation, this section argues for a conception of adaptation that includes the creation of an abstract mental model of a text as being the first step of not only adaptation, but any intertextual process. Those who engage with adaptations are constantly comparing their experience of the text to this mental model in a process I discuss as “a loop of recognition.” The chapter then transitions to a similarly structured discussion of games, following game designers including Katie Salen Tekinbas, Eric Zimmerman, and Jesse Schell in defining them as formal systems of play.⁴ After briefly touching on games’ sometimes contentious relationship with narrative, I draw on Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek’s “Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics” framework to show how games can be productively discussed in terms of mechanical “gameplay loops” and the experiences they produce. Finally, I bring all of these theories of texts, adaptations, and games together to describe the systems approach to adaptation that will be utilized in the rest of this dissertation, one which takes into account the parallel processes of play and recognition occurring within game adaptations – and, for that matter, all adaptations – that allow these texts to make meaning. Throughout all of this, I will consistently return to Ryan North’s 2014 gamebook *To Be or Not to Be* (a ludic adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*) to illustrate the

framework, as it provides an insightful introduction into some of the concepts and issues that will be elaborated on in later chapters.

Chapter 2 functions as an application and elaboration of the previous chapter's theorizations, using game adaptations of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) to explore the way that a systems approach to adaptation can alter (or "riddle") our understanding of how fidelity, agency, and knowledge operate in the user's experience of an adaptation. It begins by deconstructing the concept of fidelity through an examination of Tolkien's extensive revisions of *The Hobbit*, revealing that the "original" novel has always been narratively and stylistically torn in its alignment with the epic tone of Tolkien's later novels and the whimsical fairy stories which inspired it. While this conflict between genre conventions and narrative coherence is shared by game adaptations, what makes *The Hobbit* even more instructive for understanding game adaptations is Tolkien's clever "solution" to this problem: making the relationship between *The Hobbit* and his later novels ironic rather than mimetic through the form of the literary riddle. Building on the work of Adam Roberts and folklore scholars, I make the case that we can productively read the relationship between Tolkien's *Hobbit* and its game adaptations (indeed, any game adaptation and its sources) through the lens of the riddle, a literary form which (like games and adaptations) draws its meaning from the active process of recognition and playful interpretation. With the figure of the riddle in mind, the chapter goes on to analyze a series of *Hobbit* game adaptations, interrogating how they balance the often-conflicting relationship between the player's knowledge of the source text (which fuels the loop of recognition essential to adaptation) and their ability to make meaningful choices as an agent in the storyworld (which fuels compelling game loops). As I argue in an extended reading of a primary case study – Beam Software's 1982 text-adventure version of *The Hobbit* – game adaptations can maintain this

balance in much the same way that Tolkien did: by integrating dissonances between differing versions of the story as part of the overall experiential system of the text. Rather than think of these dissonances as moments of infidelity, my analysis of *The Hobbit* game adaptation reveals them to be interpretatively generative, making the act of engaging with an adaptation akin to the active interpretative process of solving the riddles that populate and structure Tolkien's work.

If the second chapter is aligned with the worries of conventional adaptation studies discourse in that it uses a commercial video game to complicate the notion of fidelity to a single source's narrative, Chapter 3 pushes the boundaries of this mold by using a crowd-sourced tabletop roleplaying game – the Jane Austen-inspired *Good Society* (Storybrewers 2018) – to theorize the ways that characters are instantiated across multiple texts independently of any given source's plot. The first half of the chapter is primarily invested in establishing the concept/structural metaphor of what I call *abstraction*, a term borrowed from computer science to refer to the process of creating a personal mental model of a literary character or world from observations of multiple iterations of that character/world. Using the many varied iterations of the Austenian hero "Mr. Darcy" as a touchstone, I argue that understanding adaptation as the hidden "first step" in adaptation (or any act of textual transformation) can help us better analyze adaptations that seem to deviate wildly from one's expectations of a given text. After illustrating the concept of abstraction via analyses of game adaptations of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), the second half of the chapter presents a more sustained analysis of *Good Society*, emphasizing how its abstraction of its source material deviates from the conventions of the tabletop roleplaying game genre in ways that resonate with Austen's oeuvre as well as her ethos as a writer. In particular, I argue that the game's proximity to the genre of tactical war games encourage us to think of Austen's role as a strategic thinker, its focus on structured collaborative

storytelling calls attention to Austen's role as a narrative designer, and its non-random conflict resolution system reflects Austen's allegiance to the contemplation of the possible over the mere acceptance of the probable, a tendency which is core to the ironic resistance to convention that undergirds all of her work. Throughout this analysis, I draw heavily upon innovative works of Austen scholarship by Michael Chwe, Mike Goode, and William Galperin (respectively) to emphasize how the study of game adaptations can be as useful to literary scholars as it is to those who study games and adaptations.

Finally, this project's conclusion engages in a close reading of one final case study – USC Game Innovation Lab's *Walden, a game* (2017), a vividly rendered digital adaptation of Henry David Thoreau's text of the same name – as a way of reviewing the previous chapter's insights on the systems approach as well as providing deeper insights into two concepts that lie just beneath the surface of the former analyses: immersion and play. I argue that, contrary to some of the surface level discourse around games and game adaptation, the vivid visual aesthetics and compelling challenges of some video games do not necessarily compel players to isolate themselves from the real world. Instead, I use Janet Murray's concept of "immersion" to show that it is more productive to consider how game adaptations encourage users to see themselves as elements within a larger system which includes the text, its intertexts, historical context, and even their own thoughts and beliefs. *Walden, a game* encourages such a view not solely through its simulation of the living ecosystem of Walden Pond, but also through its minimalist mechanics, which facilitate a slow-paced, contemplative experience that resonates with the philosophy of Thoreau. While they cannot recreate Thoreau's experience in the actual woods (nor could that be possible), the open-ended wanderings within the virtual woods allow for an interpretatively productive sense of play that lies at the heart of all game adaptations. I end

my dissertation with a brief discussion of what it means to be “at play” within the interacting systems that constitute game adaptations and how such play can help us better understand texts, culture, and perhaps even ourselves.

As I hope this introduction has made clear, my goal in this dissertation is to provoke interpretative questions more than it is to provide clear answers. All of the concepts presented through the chapters summarized above – intertextual systems, loops of recognition, riddle-like structures of player agency, abstraction, and the engagement with an adaptation as immersive play – are as much structural metaphors in and of themselves as they are elements of a critical perspective. Those scholars who feel that the idea of “systems” makes reading texts feel inorganic or stratified are welcome to utilize any other elements presented here, so long as they are useful to studying and teaching others about literary adaptation. Although a more wide-ranging study of different types of texts is outside of the scope of this project, my eventual hope is that a systems approach can be productively applied to game adaptations based on non-literary sources such as film, adaptations of texts into non-game media (film, theater, comics, etc.), and studies of genre, fan fiction, transmedia storyworlds, and other forms of textuality. For now, however, I will focus on the phenomenon of literary game adaptations in hopes that such discussion will encourage readers to seek out and study these fascinating (and occasionally odd) cultural artifacts for themselves. On that note, there is perhaps no better place to start than a playful take on a patently unplayful play: Ryan North’s *Hamlet*-inspired gamebook *To Be or Not to Be*.

Chapter 1:

To Be or Not to Be (An Adaptation): Systems, Games, and Textual Identity

“Dost thou hear me, old friend; can you play the Murder of Gonzago?”

-William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (2.2.1608-1609)



Figure 5 – Choosing a character in Ryan North's *To Be or Not to Be*

Early in the digital version of Ryan North's "choose-your-own-adventure" style gamebook *To Be or Not to Be* (2014), readers are prompted to select their character (Figure 5).⁵ Their options: Ophelia, "an awesome lady in her mid-twenties" with "+1 to science," but a "-1 weakness to water"; Hamlet, the "emo teen" Prince of Denmark with a "+1 resistance to magic" (in a story with no magical elements); or Hamlet Sr., an "unstoppable machine of death" who is "super good at leading people into battle and naps." Selecting the last of these characters, of course, does not lead to the "kingly glory" promised by the initial description, but a quick and inevitable demise at the hands of the king's brother, punctuated by the narrator's meta-narrative mockery ("Hah hah, wow! You've barely made one choice so far and you're dead already. Way to go champ! You're really good at books, huh?"). In a moment of feigned pity, the gamebook's narrator then offers the reader another choice: to let Hamlet Sr. become a ghost and presumably kickstart a series of events that will bring their murderer to justice, or to accept his fate and cease

to exist altogether. Whether the degrading comments and low score on the flashy “Ham-lo-Meter” resulting from this latter act of rebellion are meant to shame the reader for deliberately throwing the game or for intentionally derailing the adaptation hardly matters to the unseen narrator. All this disembodied figure asks is that the reader “play the book again,” a phrase that neatly encompasses the text’s seemingly confused role as both a game and an adaptation.

Despite (or perhaps because of) its playful tone, North’s gamified rendition of *Hamlet* serves as a useful illustration of the identity crises inherent in games, adaptations, and game adaptations. For some theorists writing in the early days of game studies, scenes like this illustrate the folly of translating classic literature into playable form. The inevitable doom of flawed and tragic heroes in works like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* seems to be undercut by a medium in which players may choose more reasonable options for their avatars or restart the game with no real consequences for failure. Further, while the ability to make choices may enhance a player’s engagement with the storyline (players of *To Be or Not to Be* may at one point literally “play the Murder of Gonzago,” represented as a choose-your-own-adventure style gamebook inside of the choose-your-own-adventure style gamebook), doing so will always be worlds apart from engaging with a staged performance of Shakespeare’s original play. As scholar Jesper Juul puts it in an early article on the game/story distinction written well before North’s adaptation was published:

Even if we were to *play* only a single game session of a hypothetical game and end up performing exactly the same sequence of events that constitute *Hamlet*, we would not have had the same experience as had we *watched Hamlet* performed. We would also not consider the game to be the same object as the play since we would think of the game as an explorable dynamic system that allowed for a multitude of sequences.

It is because of the fundamental mismatch between the experience of the viewer and the experience of the player that Juul concludes “games and stories do not actually translate to each

other in the way that novels and movies do” and adds (in a footnote) that “*Hamlet* is actually a poor choice for game adaptation.”

Be that as it may, *Hamlet*’s supposed unsuitability for adaptation has not stopped game designers from attempting the task. Since Juul’s article was published in 2001, *Hamlet* has been the focus of at least five games aside from North’s *To Be or Not to Be*, covering a wide range of genres and using the source material to various ends. Some, like the *Hamlet*-themed questline in the massively multiplayer roleplaying game *Mabinogi* (devCat 2011) or Robin Johnson’s text-adventure version of the tale (2003), align the player’s goals with that of the Danish prince as he aims to avenge his father’s death and only ends when justice has been served. Others, like Mike Young’s light-hearted board game *Hamlet! A Game in Five Acts* (2002) or Golden Glitch Studios’ grim retelling of the story from the perspective of Ophelia (*Elsinore*, 2019), encourage players to alter or avoid the play’s tragic ending by subtly manipulating the drama’s characters. Still others seem to have little connection to the source material whatsoever, as in the time-traveling antics and Rube-Goldberg-esque puzzles of the long-winded title *Hamlet, or the Last Game without MMORPG Features, Shaders and Product Placement* (Denis Galanin 2010). There was even a CD-ROM tie-in to Kenneth Branagh’s 1996 film adaptation (released five years *before* Juul’s writing) that reframed the play as an interactive murder mystery, featuring thirty minutes of live action cutscenes and over twenty-five minigames (Castle Rock 1997). No matter one’s preference for tone or gameplay, the existence of these artifacts seem to prove that there are plenty of ways for willing audiences to play through, with, and as *Hamlet* without needing to set foot in a theater.

But should we consider these artifacts to be (or not to be) adaptations as we understand the term today? After all, Juul is right to say that playing a game version of *Hamlet* – even the

less absurd or parodical of the titles listed above – is not the same experience as watching the play performed. Even making all the same choices Hamlet does in the play (conveniently marked by tiny Yorick skulls in North’s *To Be or Not to Be*) results in an experience that is paced, presented, and narrativized in a manner that is quite different than Shakespeare’s original. Of course, to some extent the same could be said regarding all adaptations: reading an annotated transcript of *Hamlet* in the classroom is undeniably a different experience from watching the play performed, just as watching Laurence Olivier’s 1948 noir-ish interpretation of the tragedy is distinct from director Michael Almereyda’s historically updated *Hamlet 2000*. While each of these artifacts share the name *Hamlet*, we certainly would not consider any of them to be (in Juul’s words) “the same object as the play,” if such a goal were even desirable. In fact, adaptations of all types seem to draw just as much from the conventions of the genre and medium into which they are adapted as they do from their source texts: no one goes to a *Hamlet* opera without expecting the actors to burst into song, just as no one who downloads a *Hamlet* video game expects to merely sit and watch a drama unfold. That said, there does seem to be some truth to Juul’s idea that games based on literary works operate differently than do adaptations of novels to film (or any other combination of media, for that matter), if only because games and film are different media. Perhaps the better question when confronted with game adaptations is not whether one *can* play something like *Hamlet*, but how the adaptation of a literary work into a playable game system alters, subverts, or deepens our understanding of both the source material and the uniquely expressive power of games as a medium.

In an attempt to better answer this question, this chapter lays the foundation for a analytical framework aimed at literary game adaptations – that is, playable digital or analog systems based upon another work or works, primarily print literature – by drawing on theories of

games, adaptations, and textuality. It will begin by engaging with questions of textual identity, establishing a definition of “text” informed by theorists such as Roland Barthes and Gerard Genette. From there, it will confront the ghosts of fidelity and narrativity that have respectively haunted the discourses of adaptation scholarship and game studies in order to discover the similarities between both fields and how their objects of study operate. After bringing together the relevant actors in this way, this chapter will then present an approach for looking at literary game adaptations as *systems of experience* in which both game mechanics and intertextual relationships play key roles. As such, game adaptations frame the process of creating and engaging with adaptations of all kinds as productive play, a way of generating new experiences and interpretations of classic texts by bringing their many elements into sometimes unorthodox configurations and interactions. Aside from serving as the methodological basis for the rest of this project’s case studies, the systems approach to game adaptations described below is meant to reveal that not just all adaptations, but all texts can be productively conceived of as such systems, thus giving textual scholars a tool for approaching texts that do not always fit common narrative categorizations. While the definitions and concepts presented here are meant to be provisional and exploratory rather than definitive, they are intended to encourage scholars to delve deeper into the subject of both games and adaptations in the future.

Texts and Textual Identity

The first question that needs to be answered in a project like this is a deceptively simple one: what is a text? Simply put, this project will consider a “text” to be any set of signs that can be “read” or interpreted, including literary works, films, television advertisements, and (of course) digital or analog games. This broad definition is a product of multiple theoretical and

methodological trends that have left their mark on the discipline of literary studies over the past century. These trends include semiotics, which built upon Ferdinand de Saussure's development of linguistics in placing meaning of literature within the individual signs and signifiers of language; American New Criticism, which emphasized the practice of close-reading literary works as self-contained aesthetic objects rather than moral or ethical parables; and British cultural studies, which shifted emphasis away from the aesthetics of canonical literature to the power dynamics inherent in all types of media and cultural phenomena. To give even these three trends the nuanced treatment they deserve would take many more pages than I can afford to allot here, and as the current task is to present a framework by surveying other fields (adaptation studies and game scholarship), I will leave these histories to other scholars.⁶ However, in order to better understand some of the origins and problems regarding the study of games and adaptations, as well as to situate my framework within the study of textuality more generally, it will prove useful to sketch Roland Barthes' distinction between works and texts.

In his 1971 essay "From Work to Text," Roland Barthes claims that "the combined action of Marxism, Freudianism, and structuralism demands, in literature, the relativizations of the relations of the writer, reader, and observer (critic)" (156). This requires a distinction between seeing any particular piece of literature as a singular, closed, and authored "work" and an irreducibly plural, open, authorless "Text," the "methodological field" above the work's "fragment of substance" (159). Whereas the work can be closed off and classified, the Text "cannot be contained in a hierarchy, even in a simple division of genres" (157); whereas the work may be determined by history and the biographical information of an author, the Text "reads without the inscription of the Father" (161); and whereas a work can be consumed and closed off by interpretation, a Text can only be encountered as "radically symbolic: a work

conceived, perceived, and received in its integrally symbolic nature” (158). Drawing on a distinction that he elsewhere describes as the difference between “readerly” and “writerly” texts,⁷ Barthes also describes the Text as being not about consumption, but about “play” (162). Texts not only exhibit flexibility in their meanings (“like a door, like a machine with ‘play’”), but ask to be actively played both as one plays a game (“looking for a practice which reproduces it”) and as one plays an instrument, “interpreting” the Text in order to activate or complete it (162). For Barthes, “the discourse on the Text should itself be nothing other than text, research, textual activity since the Text is that social space which leaves no language safe” (164). In other words, the object of literary scholarship, for Barthes, is to add interpretive depth to the multivalent “Text” rather than close off a singular “work.”

While Barthes’ thoughts on works versus texts provide guidance for this project’s goals and stakes (as we will see below), they do little to answer the more practical questions of textuality when it comes to the notions of games and adaptations. What makes a particular text the text that it is and not some other text? What gives a text its identity? To explore this, let us consider two extremes of textual identity. On one extreme is the idea that each version of a text is its own text, completely unconnected to any other work which purports to be a version of that text. While this is true, strictly speaking, holding onto this distinction rigorously does not always make for useful analysis in the context of adaptation scholarship. *Hamlet* serves as a particularly apt example of this phenomenon, as the play as we know it today is derived from three separate editions of a script published in Shakespeare’s First Quarto (1603), Second Quarto (1604), and First Folio (1623), each differing in the inclusion or exclusion of certain lines and passages (Bevington 13). While Shakespeare scholars and historians have made much of the differences between these versions (and rightfully so), it would be much less productive to parse them out as

three completely separate influential works every time one discusses a modern iteration of *Hamlet*. The other extreme – to say that a text has no identity apart from any other text, and that every text is connected boundlessly – is equally true, but equally unhelpful. Shakespeare’s story of a young prince overthrowing his wicked uncle is hardly original in a folkloric perspective, and lineages could be traced between it and any number of similar tales dating back to antiquity.

While it might be provocative to say that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the thirteenth-century Scandinavian saga *Gesta Danorum* (which has been posited as a source for *Hamlet*, see Bevington 8), and Disney’s *The Lion King* (1994) are essentially the same text because of their similar premises, such an approach is far from an orthodox interpretative move. The answer of determining a text’s identity lies between the two extremes of radical difference and radical similarity; the question of how flexible the concept becomes is a matter of practicality.

In some ways, the practical question of textual identity is a classic “ship of Theseus” problem.⁸ While Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is arguably still recognizable as the same “thing” when the titular Prince is a film student (Ethan Hawke in *Hamlet 2000*) or a porn star (Christoph Clark in *Hamlet: For the Love of Ophelia*), how many elements can be changed until it is no longer recognized as the same work? This line of thinking pre-supposes the existence of some set of formal and narrative conventions by which one *can* recognize a work. Such a set is probably not inherent to any particular version of that work – while purists may point out that the titular prince’s meditations on his old jester Yorick’s remains in a graveyard and his famous soliloquy are two separate scenes, that does not prevent the image of a solitary Hamlet holding a skull in the middle of a castle from becoming shorthand for the entire play. Instead, this set of conventions which makes up a text’s identity must be dynamic, changing as other versions gain traction in a particular culture. We could, of course, go further with this line of thinking and say

that a text's "identity" is specific to any given reader at any given time. Someone who fell in love with the non-canonical flashbacks of Kenneth Branagh's 1996 film version will certainly have a different idea of that work's "identity" than an academic bookworm who sees each version in terms of an annotated reproduction of Shakespeare's First Folio, and each would also have a certain amount of tolerance towards what is included as being part of the "thing" that is *Hamlet*. Taken in this way, a text's identity can be considered to be a set of stylistic tendencies and narrative beats abstracted from a body of work or works; such a set is dynamic, personal, and influenced by the cultural and historical context in which it is read and engaged with.

Knowing this, how and why do we as literary critics make claims about textual identity? What do we consider to be important about a particular text and the relationship between it and its many retellings? Returning to Barthes, my answer is we do so not because the claims are or can be *true*, but because they can encourage deeper engagement with the text and the various intertexts, histories, and philosophies with which it is connected. If, following Barthes, texts are irreducible discursive fields, the act of engaging with them is not to complete them, but to play with them. This play is not necessarily the same as the activity one does while interacting with a game but involves play on the interpretative level, making meaningful connections between the discursive field of one text with another. The work of literary critics, as I see it, is to attempt to map the unmappable: to form connections between literary works and relevant intertexts, formal conventions, and historical contexts so that other readers may get their bearings and make connections of their own. To put a label on to any given text – to say that a text is an adaptation, or a game, or a particular genre – is already to make such a connection, and thus is meaningful not in its truth value, but in how it expands our notion the way that text makes meaning. In this framework, while taxonomies and theories of textuality cannot definitively close off a text's

“radically symbolic” meanings (following Barthes), they can serve as lenses which simultaneously orient users and invite them to explore different areas of the text’s discursive field.

One of the most relevant lenses to the present study is Gerard Genette’s 1982 work *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Genette’s aim in writing is to investigate a concept that he calls “transtextuality,” or “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (1). In order to “chart and clear the field,” he breaks down this term into five types of transtextual relationships: intertextuality (the existence of one text within another through quotation or allusion); paratextuality (a text’s relationship to its titles, covers, early drafts, marginalia, etc.); metatextuality (implicit commentary or critique of another text); architextuality (the larger structures, such as genre or discursive mode, from which a text draws); and hypertextuality (a relationship between one text and an earlier source text) (1-5). Genette’s book is focused on the last of these categories, which he goes on to further taxonomize by analyzing a litany of examples based on their “relations” (imitative or transformative) and their “moods” (playful, satirical, or serious) resulting in six distinct categories where these metrics overlap (parody, travesty, transposition, pastiche, caricature, and forgery) (28). Genette is careful to frame his labels not as rigid “categories of text” but rather as overlapping “aspects of textuality” that can be exhibited to some extent by any piece of literature (8). That said, he does note the practical value of grouping texts that exhibit these traits “more visibly, massively, and explicitly” than others for the purpose of analysis, and proceeds to label particular texts as hypertextual in order to make claims about this relationship (9). Though Genette focuses solely on print literature, his concept of hypertextuality mirrors contemporary notions of adaptation,

and adaptation scholars make many of the same methodological moves that he does (as described in the next section).

For the purposes of this project, what is relevant about Genette's work here is not necessarily his terminology ("hypertext" has come to mean something quite different in the Internet era and will not be used in Genette's terms outside of this section) but his practical approach to taxonomizing in the first place. Despite the fact his work can be seen as a commentary on this taxonomy of texts, his stated goal is not "to justify the [taxonomy] but rather to blur, dissolve, and eventually erase it" (28) – an echo of his claim that his five types of transtextuality are fluid aspects of all texts rather than rigid textual categories (8). In so doing, he aligns his methodology against "the closure of text and with deciphering its inner structures" in the manner of structuralists like Roman Jakobson and Claude Levi-Strauss and towards the "open structuralism" of "Barthes *Mythologiques*, which demonstrates how a text (a myth) can, with a little help, 'read another'" (399). Such "relational reading," in which "a new function is superimposed upon and interwoven with an older structure, and the dissonance between these two concurrent elements imparts its flavor to the resulting whole," informs the text-as-palimpsest analogy in Genette's title (398).⁹ In a Barthesian move particularly relevant for this dissertation, Genette frames this form of relational reading as a game, with pleasure emerging from the play "inherent in the very practice of reusing existing structures" that contaminates (and gives value to) even the most serious of transpositions (399). Aside from foreshadowing the framework discussed in this later in this chapter, Genette's practical approach to taxonomy – one that shows the interpretative value of textual categorization yet is flexible and inclusive in its application – encourages us to look at all textual categories as tools that open up new interpretations rather than strict boundaries that close it off.

This idea is echoed by theorists working in both game studies and adaptation studies. In his conclusion to the *Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, adaptation scholar Thomas Leitch discusses the need to push away from grand theories of adaptation in favor of “petit theory,” or provisional frameworks that open up questions rather than close off discussion. Following the work of fellow contributor Kyle Meikle, Leitch encourages scholars to ask, “What does labeling and reading a text as an adaptation allow it to do that other readings don’t? And to what does the label of adaptation commit that text and its analysts?” (707). Game scholar Espen Aarseth echoes the same sentiment in the editor’s preface to the July 2017 edition of *Game Studies*:

perhaps the best principle is to treat ‘game’ as a perspective and not as an object or an activity. Anything can be turned into a game (even a game can be turned into another game quite easily) and so the determining factor is not the activity but the way one thinks about it, and how one labels it. . . . The game-as-perspective perspective allows us to prioritize not based on material domain, or on type of activity, but on whether the phenomenon is interesting as ludic (“Just Games” 2017).

Building off of these practical approaches to treating adaptations and games as functional perspectives rather than strict categories of text, this project contends that game adaptations are best approached by treating them as games and adaptations simultaneously. In order to do this, the next sections delve into the histories of adaptation studies and game studies in order to highlight how both fields have been concerned with defining their objects of study against the conventions of academia (primarily literary scholarship). Doing so will not only reveal methodologies for approaching adaptations and games as objects which require an active user (and thus are well-suited to a systems approach) but will also reveal the driving force behind these discourses as a shared interest in how to read unconventional texts rather than a need for strict definitions.

Defining Adaptations

Adaptation, as I will be using it here, refers to a range of intertextual processes, products, and practices involving the transformative transposition of a specific work or works, in whole or in part, from one medium, mode, and/or genre to another. Although reboots, remakes, modernizations, novelizations, and even parodies may be and have been productively differentiated depending on the argument one wishes to make, all fall under the term “adaptation” in this paradigm. Due to the myriad of changes that are inevitably made when re-presenting a work in a new genre or medium, every adaptation is necessarily an interpretation of its source or sources: even the most “faithful” remake requires creative decisions regarding what material needs to be retained, and even the most irreverent parody depends partially on the source for its gags.¹⁰ Adaptations need not shift across medium (from the printed page to the screen, for example) to be counted as adaptations either. Works that shift a story’s genre (from fairy tale to gritty drama, for example) or mode of presentation (from animated to live-action) are also considered adaptations for the purpose of this study. What is important about adaptations is how they encourage those who engage with them to make connections between one work and another specified work or works; this comparative reception practice is what distinguishes adaptations both from other types of intertextual processes as well as other types of texts.

Of course, instead of merely presenting a definition *of* adaptations, it may be more useful to describe what adaptation has been defined *against*. For most of the term’s history, theorists have been implicitly or explicitly defining adaptations in contrast to hypothetical copies of the texts they adapt. In fact, one can look at the history of adaptation studies as a continuing investigation of the relationship between adaptations and their “source” texts, and how this relationship ought to inform the discourse surrounding them. The earliest discussions of this topic were often framed in terms of a text’s “fidelity” to an earlier literary source and were

almost always negative. As Glenn Jellenik makes clear in his 2017 article “On the Origins of Adaptation,” this reaction is aided by the fact that the modern conception of “adaptation” arose alongside the Romantic binaries of art vs. mass culture, invention vs. derivation, and conformity vs. solitary genius (41). Jellenik gestures to a critique of George Corman’s 1796 play *The Iron Chest* as the first work of fidelity criticism, as it attempts to show how the so-called “copy” had “fallen short” of the original novel from which it was adapted (Jellenik 46). This tendency did not seem to change in the twentieth century, as theorists began to discuss the relationship between literature, theater, and the upstart medium of film. Referring to a cinematic version of Ibsen’s drama *Ghosts*, Vachel Lindsay’s “Thirty Differences Between the Photoplays and the Stage” claimed that “the humor of the prospect was the sort too deep for tears,” while Virginia Woolf criticized how film adaptations “lurch and lumber through the most famous novels of the world” before likening them to parasites (382). Even those who were more invested in film’s potential as an artistic medium, such as the influential critics writing in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, often preferred to focus on those works which revealed the unique effects that film could achieve rather than “faithful” adaptations of literary works.¹¹ These discussions during what adaptation scholar Thomas Leitch has called the “prehistory” of adaptation studies focused more on generalized relationships between literature and film rather than specific adaptations or the processes behind their creation (*Oxford* 2).

The first full monograph devoted to a theory of specific adaptations, George Bluestone’s 1957 *Novels into Film*, attempted to subvert fidelity criticism by doubling down on the concept of medium specificity. Bluestone described a fundamental difference between print and celluloid along the lines of “percept and concept”: while film allows one to “see visually through the eye,” print allows one to “see imaginatively through the mind” (1). Although these may seem to be

analogous types of sight – Bluestone notes that film and the novel have their own grammar and tropes through language and editing, respectively (24) – Bluestone argues that they are not easily transferable from one medium to the other (5). In fact, Bluestone claims that true “fidelity” to a source text is impossible, due to the unique “origins, conventions, and audiences” of each medium (61). Bluestone writes that when a filmmaker sets out to adapt a novel

he does not convert the novel at all. What he adapts is a kind of paraphrase of the novel – the novel viewed as raw material. He looks not at the organic novel, whose language is inseparable from its theme, but to characters and incidents which have somehow detached themselves from language and, like the heroes of folk legends, have achieved a mythic life of their own (62).

His conception of novel as raw material frames the process of adaptation as not at all dissimilar from making any work of art which draws on cultural myths for inspiration. When combined with the idea that novels and films are categorically distinct, such a view short-circuits fidelity criticism by making the direct adaptation (as it is commonly understood) impossible and reframing film adaptations as films akin to any other. This, in turn, supports his later claim that “the filmist becomes not a translator for an established author, but a new author in its own right,” perhaps giving more credence to the six comparative book-to-film adaptations that he analyzes following his introductory chapter (62).

Much of adaptation scholarship in the wake of Bluestone’s monograph has attempted to recast the act of “faithfully” recreating a particular novel (or, following Bluestone, the “paraphrase” of it) for the screen as one of many ways to approach the practice of adaptation rather than a standard assumption. Geoffrey Wagner, for example, taxonomizes adaptations into transpositions (adaptations with “a minimum of apparent interference” on the part of the author [28]), commentaries (in which the filmmaker has “a different intention,” but generally adheres to the plot [29]), and analogies (“which must represent a fairly considerable departure for the sake

of making another work of art” [30]). Dudley Andrew presents a similar taxonomy six years later, contrasting the concept of a supposed “fidelity of transformation” with other approaches to adaptation including “borrowing” (using parts of a source, often for cultural value) and “intersecting” (refracting or shedding light on the source text) (Andrew 98-99). The desire to define adaptations against each other rather than an unachievable “faithful copy” of the source text has led to scholars borrowing or creating a profusion of terms and tropes to distinguish between adaptations and adjacent processes, including appropriations (Sanders), celebrations (Leitch, *Discontents*), remakes (Horton and McDougal), and remediations (Bolter and Grusin). Despite the fact that many still use the language of fidelity in distinguishing their categories and are based in Bluestone’s rather rigid understandings of medium specificity, these categorizations (and those that would come later) continued to encourage scholars to read adaptations as texts in their own right.

By the mid-1990s, adaptation scholars were pursuing models of adaptation that extended beyond the classic novel-to-film process and included a wide variety of intertextual relationships. Perhaps one of the most ambitious works of expansion in this regard is Linda Hutcheon’s influential book *A Theory of Adaptation*, which attempts to frame adaptation as inclusive of all manner of media and intertextual processes. Hutcheon defines adaptation as simultaneously a product, a process, and a practice of reception: “an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works, a creative *and* interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging, [and] an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work” (8). Like Bluestone, Hutcheon proposes an understanding of adaptation as being across modes of engagement (telling, showing, and interacting rather than percept and concept) and emphasizes that “each has at its own disposal different means of expression . . . and so can aim at and achieve certain things better

than others” (24). Unlike Bluestone’s framing, however, these modes are not attached to particular media: films can “tell” through dialogue and intertitles as well as show through images, and the “showing” mode includes theatrical and new media works just as much as film or television. Such broad definitions of the subject and these modes provides space for the many varying frameworks and methods to adaptation as discussed by contemporary scholars, allowing them to focus on the inherent appeal of “repetition with variation” shared by works that lie on the spectrum of intertextual works between strict translations and sequels or spin-offs (9, 170-171). In short, such work allows scholars to (in Hutcheon’s words) “treat adaptations *as* adaptations” across methods and media forms, whether they are cinematic reboots, operettic reinterpretations, or (of course) literature-inspired games (6).

This framing of adaptations as simultaneously processes, products, and reception practices puts them in conversation with another subject in film studies that is arguably just as mired in matters of textual identity and transformation: the notion of genre.¹² In his book *Film/Genre*, Rick Altman presents two ways in which genres are formed, processes he calls “the critic’s game” and “the producer’s game” (38). The critic’s game is retroactive: a critic gleans the existence of a genre from industrial or critical sources, analyzes films in that genre to come up with a set of characteristics that describe said genre, adds more films to the genre based on this framework, and then proceeds to make claims about how that genre makes meaning. The producer’s game, for Altman, follows a very similar structure: a producer begins by identifying a successful film, analyzing the features that made it successful, then makes films based on those features in an attempt to make another hit. Playing these “games” side-by-side reveals that rather than placing critique as coming after production, “genres begin as reading positions established by studio personnel acting as critics, and are expressed through film-making. . . as an act of

applied criticism” (44). Altman goes on to claim that “this process is a never-ending one,” as genres are constantly forming and reforming due to the interpretations of critics, audiences, and producers over time (48). This ensures that a genre’s identity is never fully stable: “while some viewers may be convinced of the need to define a given genre in one way, others will have come in contact with quite dissimilar ‘generic speech acts’ and thus will see both texts and genre in a different manner entirely” (176). For Altman, genres are multivalent subjects which require a flexible approach in order to understand. His approach not only takes into account a genre’s semantic elements (common traits, images, styles, and archetypes associated with a genre) and syntactic relationships (how the semantic elements are structured in a text), but also the pragmatics of how communities use genres and how genres evolve over time (219, 214).

When read through Altman’s lens, the differences between genres and adaptations become more a matter of degree than of kind. Adaptations, like genres, begin as the “reading position” of a creator, who creates the adaptation as “an act of applied criticism” (Altman 44). Hutcheon’s definition of adaptations as “creative and interpretive act[s] of appropriation/salvaging” implies the same thing (Hutcheon 8). Both adaptations and genres can also be said to be intimately linked with the pleasure of “repetition with variation” (Hutcheon 9), as Altman’s construct of the “producer’s game” can attest (38). Although adaptations often are more explicit about the sources upon which they draw than genre films are, the style and substance of any given adaptation are far from stable. Those who adapt classic works into other media can be said to be playing their own “game” similar to the games Altman describes, taking into account not just the source of the adaptation but also other adaptations of the same source. Kenneth Branagh’s unabridged *Hamlet* is as much of a response to Franco Zeffirelli’s radically cut cinematic version of the story from six years earlier as it is to Shakespeare’s original play,

and both films are also influenced by specific contemporary productions of *Hamlet* rather than reinterpreting all of the stage directions on their own (Crowl 225). Perhaps more important than the similarities between the processes of producing adaptations and genre films are the similarities in viewership which emerge by reading Altman and adaptation theory together. To reapply Altman's phrasings on genre (176), while some viewers may define *Hamlet* in one way, others will see both *Hamlet* and the point of adapting it differently because they will have come in contact with quite dissimilar "adaptational speech acts" that helped them form such a definition of a text in the first place. In other words, each person's experience of an adaptation or genre film is already mediated through their own conception of a source text or genre's identity, their own personal Bluestonian "paraphrase" of the source material which serves as a basis of comparison for their viewing, reading, or gameplay experience.

As I will describe further in chapter 3, the process and product of this textual or generic paraphrasing is what I will refer to as *abstraction*. An abstraction can be thought of as the "mental model" a user has of a given text, including its characters, plot points, themes, formal elements, and the relations between them. Such abstractions are formed in a process similar to that in Bluestone's "adaptation as paraphrase" or Altman's "games" of genre formation, in which users abstract a text or body of texts into a collection of conventions that serve as either the "raw material" for future products or the basis against which audiences might compare a text to its perceived source. Because abstractions depend upon the person doing the abstracting – their memories of the text, the other texts from which they make their abstraction, and the context in which they engage with them – they need not be entirely cohesive or consistent with a given source. Someone whose first exposure to *Hamlet* is through a theatrical performance in period costume will have a different conception of *Hamlet* than someone whose only exposure is

through an abridged film version set in the modern day, while someone who has seen both may include a fight scene from one with an actor's performance in another when recalling their personal abstracted understanding of *Hamlet*. Genres are such abstractions, made up of narrative and stylistic elements (Altman's semantics) set in recognizable relationships (Altman's syntax), but because they may be derived from different selections of text or based upon different elements or configurations they are necessarily varied and subject to change.

In fact, one might consider abstraction to be the first step in adaptation, fan fiction, or any intertextual process that involves the acknowledged reproduction or reshaping of another text. The differences lie in the relationship between these texts and their abstractions. An adaptation is derived from the abstraction of a specific text (Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and works claiming to be it), whereas a generic text is derived from an abstraction of many varied texts (*Hamlet* is one of many 16th century revenge tragedies); an adaptation is specific in its usage of an abstraction (the characters of Hamlet, his father, and Ophelia appear) whereas a generic text is less so (the tragic hero, their fallen mentor, and a love interest may have different names and traits). Both adaptations and genre films are derived from abstractions of a kind, but whereas genre films are derived from general abstractions of multiple texts (i.e. genres), adaptations are derived from a more specific abstraction of one text (what I will be referring to as textual abstractions). Presented this way, the differences between adaptations, genre films, and other intertextual processes that involve the re-articulation of characters, structures, or plots depends on how they encourage or promote the audience's process of abstraction to and from the text at hand.

Although the study of adaptation has been based on a struggle against the notion of fidelity – comparing an adaptation favorably or unfavorably against what is fundamentally an abstraction of its source – little attention has been paid to understanding textual abstractions as

such. This is in part because a focus on the product of the adaptation process combined with a desire to avoid fidelity criticism has obscured the existence of the first step in this process. When the bulk of adaptation scholarship is centered on novel-to-film adaptations – both linear media with a traditional focus on storytelling – it is easy to ignore the process of abstraction in favor of comparing the film to the book on the basis of how accurately the former relays the plot information of the latter. But while adaptation scholars know that such evaluative discourse foregoes meaningful textual analysis and ignores the myriad of provocatively “unfaithful” ways creators approach the process of adaptation, adaptation scholarship has held a comparative methodology as its core. Indeed, to treat something as an adaptation is to constantly compare it to another text, and this is one of the strengths of reading adaptations *as adaptations* (to borrow Hutcheon’s phrase). However, when a linearly plotted text is adapted into a form which is built upon the multilinear or nonlinear traversal of narrative and non-narrative information (like games), a one-to-one comparison becomes impossible. Instead, these adaptations are more clearly linked to the abstraction of the text than the textual object from which it was derived, and so bring the operation of abstraction to the forefront. As the next sections will discuss, this is because games may be productively seen to operate as systems rather than linear narratives, designed for productive, unpredictable play rather than for the portrayal of narrative content. Such systems both emphasize the role of abstraction inherent to the production of (and engagement with) adaptations and further minimizes the concept of strict fidelity to a source.

Defining Games

Like adaptation scholarship’s wrestling with the specter of fidelity criticism, the rise of contemporary game studies was accompanied by a thorny issue regarding the identity of their

object of study. For better or for worse, the conflict surrounding this issue has come to be known as the ludology/narratology “debate.” In the early 1990s, the rise of personal computing and the early stages of the Internet were generating interest about the storytelling potentials of the computer within academic and literary circles. Much of this centered around the concept of the hypertext, a form of link-driven electronic text that (in the words of Robert Coover in “The End of Books”) promised to “[free] the reader from domination by the author” via interactive interfaces, nonlinear narratives, and sometimes even the ability for readers to add their own elements to an existing story (706). While hypertext fiction ultimately did not usher in the sea change some of its early adopters described, the discussion around them helped spur interest in looking at digital games as textual objects. Scholars such as Brenda Laurel (*Computers as Theatre*, 1991), Henry Jenkins and Justine Cassel (*From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender in Computer Games*, 2000), and especially Janet Murray (*Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 1997) investigated digital games primarily as branches of interactive storytelling. By examining character simulation programs, deconstructing the multiple paths of text adventures, and musing on the possibilities of virtual reality, these theorists sought (in Murray’s words) to “imagine a compelling literature that builds upon [computer] game structures without being diminished by them” (*Holodeck* 162).

These early theorists’ excitement surrounding the storytelling potential of digital technologies, however, drew skepticism from others in the academy. Theorists who were trained in formal narratology – spearheaded by the University of Copenhagen’s Espen Aarseth, Gonzalo Frasca, and Jesper Juul – were concerned by the tendency to see the formally complex and increasingly influential medium of games as merely another way of telling stories. Instead, these self-described “ludologists” insisted upon taking a formal approach to the study of games, one

that treated games as aesthetic objects in their own right that are distinct from narratives and stories of all kinds and thus require new methodologies to approach them. Jesper Juul voiced the complaints of many ludologists in his early work by pointing out how “narrative tends to be isolated from or even work against the computer game-ness of the game,” a point proven by successful early games with very limited graphical capabilities (“Clash”). Meanwhile, the work of Gonzalo Frasca and his colleague Ian Bogost attempted to frame the expressive power of games as arising from gameplay itself, which can “express messages in ways that narrative simply cannot, and vice versa” (Frasca 225). Aarseth went as far as to accuse Murray and other literary humanists of “academic colonialism” for trying to redefine games as merely interactive stories, insisting that that even in games adapted from other works “the key elements, the narration and the gameplay, like oil and water, are not easily mixed” (“Genre Trouble” 51).

Polemical rhetoric aside, those involved in the ludology/narratology “debate” eventually came to see that their goals were more aligned than opposed. In a keynote for the 2005 Digital Games Research Association Conference, Janet Murray declared the “debate” between ludology and narratology was never real in the first place, as none of the so-called “narratologists” (herself included) were actually trained in that field. The binary between games and stories, it seemed, was a product of a contingent of (mainly European) scholars rebelling against the perceived limitations of their own academic upbringing in formal literary aesthetics and thus “debating a phantom of their own creation” (Murray 2005). Aarseth, for his part, would not only agree with Murray – Murray cites a blog post in which he observes that “virtually all the so-called ludologists are actually trained in narratology. Go figure” – but would go on to list “Don’t mention ‘the war’” as the first of his tips for new scholars entering game studies (Aarseth 2019). The point is well-taken, but I bring up this discipline-forming conflict here not only because it

resonates with similarly everlasting struggles within adaptation studies (similarities further parsed in the next section), but also because it has irrevocably influenced the public and academic discourse surrounding games and stories. If anything is to be gained from the ludology/narratology debate, it is the fact that although games *can* tell stories, that is far from their only purpose or aesthetic capability; though some aspects can be described using existing theories of narrative, such readings are often incomplete without the meaning-making power that gameplay can provide. As such, a theory for looking at game adaptations may do well to utilize an understanding of games that not only includes a wide variety of non-digital and non-graphical artifacts, but one that is able to treat games as games just as it treats adaptations as adaptations.

Games can and have been looked at from a variety of perspectives (as storytelling media, social spaces, communal rituals, material culture, and more) but the approach most relevant to this project involves seeing games as systems. According to the definition from Katie Salen Tekinbas and Eric Zimmerman's *Rules of Play*, itself compiled from a range of previous definitions: "a game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome" (80). Systems, as defined by Ludwig von Bertalanffy in his introductory work on general systems theory, are simply "sets of elements standing in interaction" (38). Under such a broad definition, we can see that our world is surrounded by systems: computational programs, ecological biomes, governments, and even individual living organisms are all made up of interacting elements. Such systems may be considered either closed, only operating via interactions between members of the set and thus isolated from their environments, or open, relying on inputs from elements and systems in the surrounding environment during their operation. Much of this depends on where one draws the line of a given set. A program run on a single computer, for example, may act as a closed system

when compared to the vast connections of the open Internet, but the program is in itself open to inputs from other programs and processes running on the individual machine. Whether “open”¹³ or “closed,” Bertalanffy notes that systems are often “more than the sum of their parts” (39) – that is, the new functions and capabilities which emerge from the interactions between elements cannot necessarily be predicted from the operation of each element in isolation. As such, analyses of these systems benefit from a holistic approach that includes attention to both the elements and the interactions between them rather than merely a breakdown of its individual parts or an isolated understanding of the system.

What sets games apart from other systems, as has been suggested by theorists of games and play since Johan Huizinga (1938) and Roger Caillois (1958) is their non-productive and voluntary nature. Games as systems by themselves, like play, do not result in material goods and are not enacted due to a hope that the player will earn something. If anything is to be produced by or emerge from a game, it is chiefly an emotional and aesthetic experience. In fact, for game designers like Jesse Schell, this experience is core to the study and creation of games:

“Ultimately, a game designer does not care about games. Games are merely a means to an end. . . . When people play games, they have an experience. It is this experience that the designer cares about. Without the experience, the game is worthless” (10). Schell claims that although this is not necessarily unique to games, “the split between artifact and experience is much more obvious for game design than for other entertainment” (11). As we shall see in the next section, this is what makes games so useful to adaptation studies as a whole: they encourage scholars to focus on the holistic experience behind a given text rather than that text’s materiality, prose, plot, or characters. When describing games (and other texts) as systems, we are looking towards the

experiences they produce when users interact with them, rather than their verbal, visual, or auditory content alone.

One way of understanding these experiences is through the concept of gameplay loops. Although origins of the term often depends upon who is using it – in the feedback loops of cybernetics (Tekinbas and Zimmerman 214), logic loops of computer science (Manovich 316), or cycles of iterative design (Schell 79) – the idea that

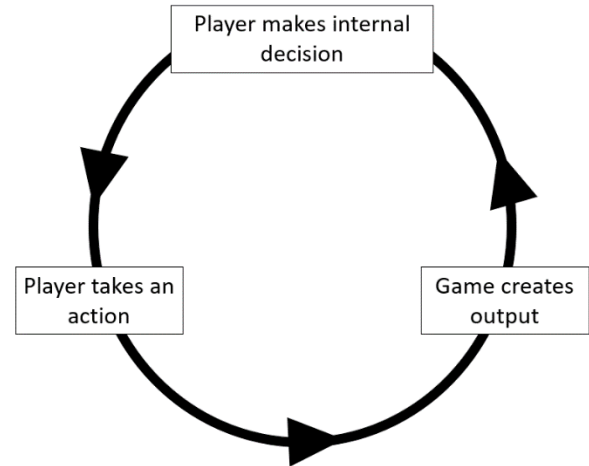


Figure 6 – Generic Gameplay Loop (adapted from Tekinbas and Zimmerman, 316)

gameplay experiences can be modeled by loops of repeated processes is common within the discourse of game design (and, to a lesser extent, game scholarship). While gameplay arises from any number of such loops, including the generic loop between player input and game outputs modeled by Tekinbas and Zimmerman (316), a game’s identity is often defined by the activities that make up its “core loop” (Figure 6). Simply put, a game’s core loop is the specific sequence of events that most commonly occurs within any given gameplay session, arising from the interplay between players and the game system as described by the rules.¹⁴ Such loops are often used to define games: game genres are commonly named after the literal action of the core loop (first-person shooters involve shooting enemies from a first-person perspective, while “platformers” involve jumping from platform to platform) or are named after a particular game that embodies such a loop (“Metroidvanias” are games that share a core loop with Nintendo’s *Metroid* [Nintendo 1986] or *Castlevania* [Konami 1987] titles, while “roguelikes” share procedural generation and permanent death with the 1980 Unix game *Rogue*). Of course, players are seldom only limited to the actions in the core loop of any given game. Depending on a

game's complexity, the "core loop" may be made up of smaller loops representing subsystems or minigames encountered during the course of play, or it may be part of a larger cycle of actions that occur during the course of any given game session. While the elements of these secondary loops are often useful in understanding how a game operates as a whole, identifying the core loop is helpful when approaching complex game systems and the mechanics which facilitate them. An attention to gameplay loops rather than a game's verbal or audiovisual content allows game designers and critics alike to focus on the experience to which Schell alludes and make clear claims about how games create them.

While Schell puts forth his own framework for understanding the experience of gameplay embodied in these loops, this project will be drawing on the methodology presented by game designers Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek in their paper "MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research." The authors break games of all types into three distinct parts, which they term Mechanics (the rules and actions of a game), Dynamics (the system arising from those rules), and Aesthetics (the experiences that emerge from the engagement with that system). Mechanics refer to the rules and the core means and methods of play they facilitate, more formally rendered by the authors as "the various actions, behaviors and control mechanisms afforded to the player within a game context" (3). In a game like *Monopoly* (Parker Brothers 1935), this includes the rules for buying properties and moving across the board, as well as the plastic pieces which represent player positions and tile ownership. Dynamics are what the authors describe as "the run-time behavior of the mechanics acting on player inputs and each others' outputs over time" – that is, the system of interactions that emerge from the mechanics (2). The authors use the feedback loops in *Monopoly* as an example of dynamics: because the mechanics dictate that players must move around the board, must pay to

buy properties, and may collect money from opponents who land on their properties, the game has a tendency to make the rich get richer. Dynamics like these, in turn, contribute to the “emotional responses evoked in the player” when they play the game – in Schell’s words, the overall experience of the game (2).

Crucially for the study of game adaptations, the components which make up this experience – and not styles of audio-visual representation or storytelling capability – are what Hunicke, Leblanc, and Zubek mean by a game’s aesthetics. In an attempt to break down what makes a game “fun” into more directed vocabulary, the authors present a non-inclusive list of eight core gameplay aesthetics:

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Sensation
<i>Game as sense-pleasure</i> | 5. Fellowship
<i>Game as social framework</i> |
| 2. Fantasy
<i>Game as make-believe</i> | 6. Discovery
<i>Game as uncharted territory</i> |
| 3. Narrative
<i>Game as drama</i> | 7. Expression
<i>Game as self-discovery</i> |
| 4. Challenge
<i>Game as obstacle course</i> | 8. Submission
<i>Game as pastime</i> |
- (2)

While many games can exhibit most (if not all) of these gameplay aesthetics, one way of analyzing, designing, and categorizing games is to identify which gameplay aesthetics are central to a particular gameplay experience and how the mechanics and dynamics might allow such aesthetics to emerge. To return to the example of *Monopoly*, the game’s rich-get-richer dynamics sell the fantasy of being a real-estate tycoon (game as make-believe), while the relatively low amount of choices available to players emerging from mechanics such as dice rolling for movement on a stable gameboard seems to encourage the aesthetic of submission (game as pastime) over something like challenge or discovery. Such vocabulary encourages more nuanced and less evaluative claims about how particular games operate, opening up discussions of how

wildly different mechanics or dynamics can result in gameplay experiences with similar core aesthetics (and vice-versa). More importantly, however, this conception of gameplay aesthetics orients discussions of games away from their representational or merely mechanical components and towards the experiences that they facilitate.

To get an understanding of how the MDA framework looks in practice, let us return to North's *To Be or Not to Be*. With this experience-based conception of games in mind, the first step of game analysis is to determine the sequence of events that structure the gameplay experience – that is, the core gameplay loop – by identifying the actions the player finds

themselves doing most often during any given play session. For *To Be or Not to Be*

Be, the core loop is relatively simple

(Figure 7) and actually mirrors the

generic gameplay loop described by

Tekinbas and Zimmerman (Figure 6,

above). First, the game presents players

with a narrative situation and a series of

choices regarding how the narrative might proceed. In our example from the beginning of this

chapter, the gamebook presents the player with the option to inhabit the characters of an “emo”

Hamlet, a heroic Hamlet Sr., or a quick-witted Ophelia. Then, the player selects one of these

options and clicks on the box associated with this choice (in our case, selecting “Hamlet Sr.” as

their character for this gameplay session).¹⁵ The player is then presented with the results of their

choice via a new narrative description – Hamlet Sr. is immediately killed and North's narrator

mocks the player's choice – and the loop repeats as a player is presented with a new choice

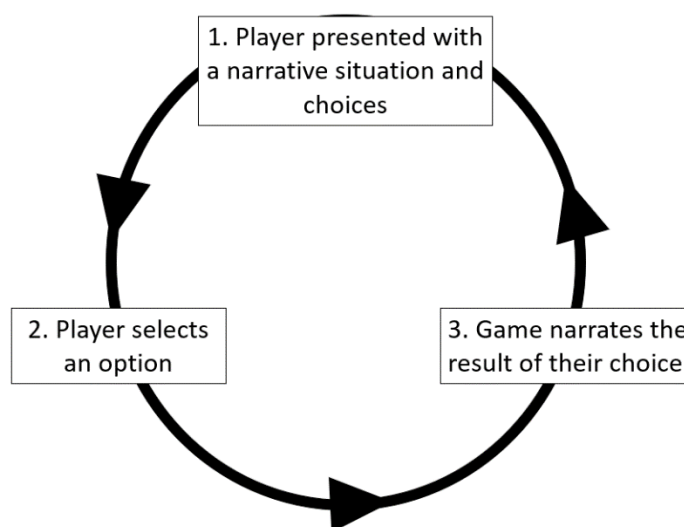


Figure 7 – *To Be or Not to Be's* core gameplay loop

(fittingly, to be [a ghost] or not to be). It is because of this core loop that *To Be or Not to Be* is considered a “choose-your-own-adventure”-style gamebook: it shares a ludic structure with the classic “Choose Your Own Adventure” books of the 70s and 80s, in which the main activity of the game is to make narrative choices for their player-character and discover the results of these choices in an attempt to reach a satisfying ending. Of course, the core loop of *To Be or Not to Be* could easily be incorporated into a secondary, higher-order loop that includes events like selecting a character and encountering an ending (Figure 8). The core loop of selecting a choice and receiving the results (B) becomes part of the larger gameplay loop of selecting a character (A) and encountering an ending (C) before starting over at the beginning again.

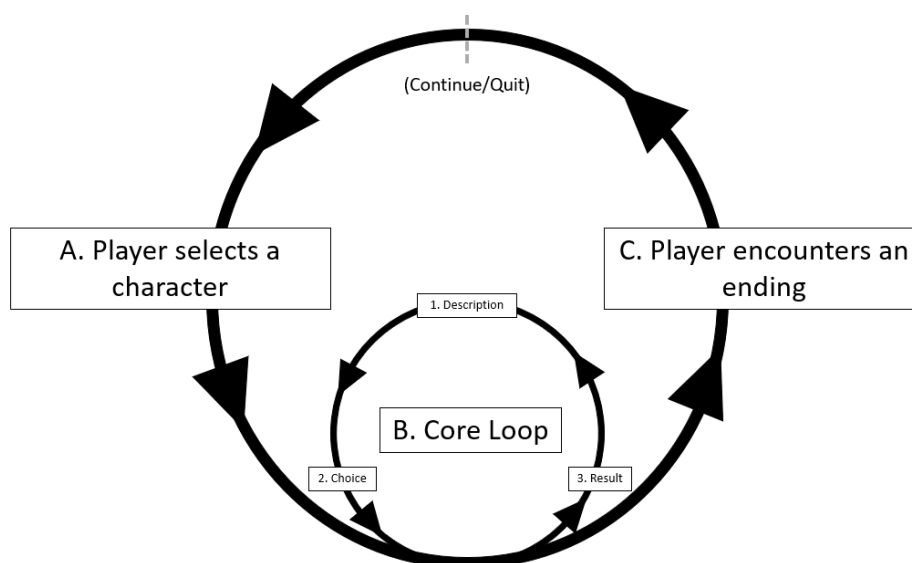


Figure 8 – Core and secondary gameplay loops in *To Be or Not to Be*

From here, one can determine the mechanics that facilitate these game actions in *To Be or Not to Be*. Each action included within the secondary loop (A, B, C) and core loop (1, 2, 3) may be conceived of as a game mechanic: the game presents pre-determined choices (1), the player selects from these choices (2), and the game presents a new pre-determined situation based upon this choice (3). These choices continue until an ending is reached (C), after which the player

must return to an earlier choice or the character select screen (A). Though these mechanics are relatively simple (especially when compared to other games), even a few of them can give rise to multiple dynamics (and in turn gameplay aesthetics) when considered together. Because the possible choices and endings are all pre-written and specific rather than randomly generated or vague, they lend themselves to creating a more coherent sequence of events when strung together. Combined with the linearity arising from the pre-determined paths restricted to each character, and the lack of any challenging numerical or abstract systems barring players from achieving an ending, we could say that the core gameplay aesthetic of this game seems to be “Narrative” rather than “Expression” or “Challenge.” This would not be the case if, for example, players could create custom characters with their own strengths and weaknesses who could pursue other opportunities or if their success or failure were determined by how quickly and intelligently they responded to randomly generated dangers. At the same time, the fact that both the number of *To Be or Not to Be*’s endings and the ultimate results of any given action are obscured from the player lends itself well to a dynamic of uncertainty, but the fact that the game keeps track of which endings the player has encountered by rewarding them original artwork might encourage players to seek them all out. Such dynamics lend to a secondary gameplay aesthetic of “Discovery,” overshadowing even the gameplay aesthetics of “Expression” (as players have no opportunity to improvise responses) and “Fantasy” (as North’s playful writing and meta-textual asides frequently break any sense of immersion in the storyworld).

It is this experience-focused conception of gameplay aesthetics that makes the MDA framework a useful tool for discussing game adaptations *as* game adaptations rather than either merely immersive storytelling devices or abstract systems thinly veiled by marketable narrative content. As the model is built upon the idea that “the content of a game is its *behavior* – not the

media that streams out of it towards the player,” it runs counter to the humanist tendency to focus on the representational elements of games alone (2). Simultaneously, however, the fact that Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek include both “Narrative” and “Fantasy” as gameplay aesthetics alongside more game-like properties such as “Challenge” or “Discovery” implies that it is impossible to cleanly separate a game’s story from the experience of gameplay. There is nothing preventing game mechanics like slow movement speed from interacting with story elements like a supposedly haunted location to contribute to a time pressure dynamic in which players feel a need to push forward out of fear of a non-existent enemy, just as dialogue can make a mechanically useless character too likeable to sacrifice, adding to the gameplay aesthetic of “Challenge.” What the framework implies is that rather than being separate from the game’s mechanics, narrative and representational components are part of the system from which aesthetic experiences emerge. Instead of asking how the formal properties of a game adaptation can immerse us in a familiar world or make stories impossible to adapt, the MDA framework encourages us to ask how the use of story elements can contribute to the overall experience a game is attempting to facilitate.

Texts as Systems

These excursions into the histories of adaptation scholarship and game studies reveal a few key parallels between the two fields, their objects of study, and their approaches to these objects. The debates at the beginning of game studies were never really about establishing the relationship between games and stories, just as the rebukes against fidelity criticism were never about defining to what degree adaptations should be similar to their source texts. Instead, both were and continue to be struggles over *how to read texts* – that is, how to interpret traditionally

marginalized popular culture objects in a way that does not disregard the features which distinguish them from other types of media. Adaptation scholars from Bluestone onward have argued for adaptations' status as texts in and of themselves, but texts which by their very nature foreground often compelling intertextual relationships with other works of art and engage the pleasures of repetition with variation. Game scholars, too, fought to have games recognized as objects worthy of study on their own terms – that is, as artifacts designed to elicit experiences not only via representational elements but through compelling, playable gameplay systems. When analyzed side by side, one may observe that treating an adaptation as an adaptation is not all that different from treating a game as a game: rather than judging either by their ability to tell a single story, we are encouraged to pay attention to the relationships between the audience and the various elements (intertexts and gameplay mechanics, respectively) that give the work its significance when set in interaction. In other words, games, adaptations, and (especially) game adaptations encourage us to look at texts as systems.

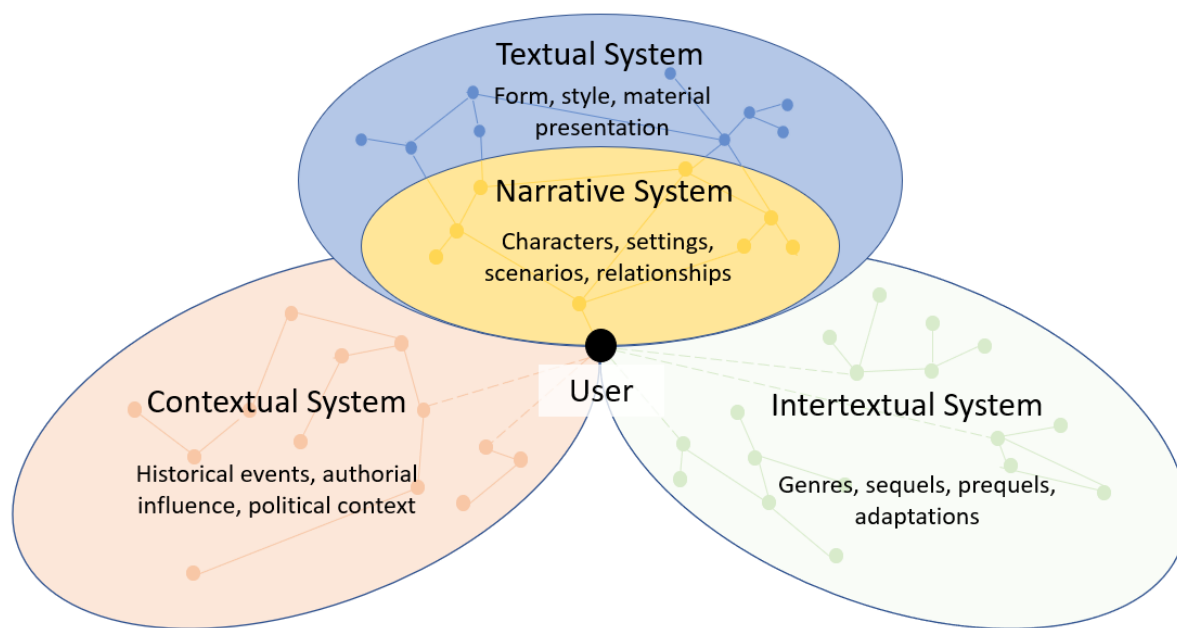


Figure 9 – Text as system

Such a perspective perhaps requires more elaboration. One overly simplistic way to look at any given text is as a piece of storytelling media: it exists to tell a single story, and the various formal elements of the text contribute to the telling or enlivening of that story. This perspective is the phantom that the ludologists tried to dispel in their early polemics against games as being merely storytelling media, as well as the bane of adaptation scholars trying to frame adaptations as works that reinterpret rather than mimic a source text. Instead, game design discourse (and to a certain extent game criticism and adaptation scholarship) can encourage scholars to frame texts as multifaceted objects with which audiences interact; it is the experience that emerges from these interactions, and not necessarily the narrative or other content a text contains, that is worth examining. According to this model, all of the parts internal to this textual object – narrative elements such as characters, settings, and scenarios; formal elements including literary or visual topoi; even the material components of the textual object – contribute to the audience's experiences of that text, whether or not the text's designer intended them to (Figure 9). Indeed, one advantage of such a model is that it decenters the author, which is especially important for

thinking about media, like games, that involve the contributions of multiple creatives and craftspeople throughout the production process. Further, this game-design inspired model emphasizes the limited influence creators have over how audiences interpret, experience, and use their work. While authors do have some control over the way narrative systems work via the interaction of their many elements (characters, setting, plot, and so forth), they can only leverage pre-existing formal conventions and contextual allusions in an attempt to structure the user's experience indirectly. As will be explored in the next chapter, "experience" itself is a bit of a misleading term as it does not necessarily posit that such an experience is unified across an audience or even for a particular member of that audience. But by decentering the author/designer, the model does make the individual who engages with the text (the user) a central node in the textual system, connecting the many internal elements of the system to larger systems of other works (an intertextual system) and the historical events related to the text's creation and reception (contextual system). It is the interactions between these elements, and not the elements in isolation, that comprise the individual user's experiences of any given text.

The goal of textual scholarship, in many ways, is to make connections between these formal, intertextual, and contextual elements – represented by interconnected dots in the figure above – opening up the possibility of new interpretations and experiences of texts and encouraging others to make compelling connections for future readers, viewers, and players. By making these extra-textual systems visible and encouraging audiences to make intertextual connections, adaptations by their very nature aid the goals of textual scholarship. To treat something as an adaptation, as established above, means to treat it as being in constant interaction with the text is adapting, engaging the reader in a cycle of recognition and revising expectations. Games, for their part, reveal this practice of manipulating and recombining

elements within a more rigid system for what it is: productive play. Because each individual's understanding of how a text connects with other elements will vary (just as each player's interactions with the dynamic systems of a game are unique) so too will their experience of a text as an adaptation. Much of describing a given textual system thus involves drawing borders around certain elements (narrative, formal, contextual, or intertextual) and interpreting possible interactions accordingly.

Let us once again return to Ryan North's *To Be or Not To Be* as an example of this in practice. When a player is confronted with selecting "Hamlet Sr." as a playable character, they are participating in the game's core loop as established above (see Figures 7 and 8): they are presented with choices, must select one of those choices, and the results of their choice will affect the path revealed by the game. But there is another cyclical user-driven process going on when we consider *To Be or Not to Be* as an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – or, more accurately, an abstraction of *Hamlet* formed by the

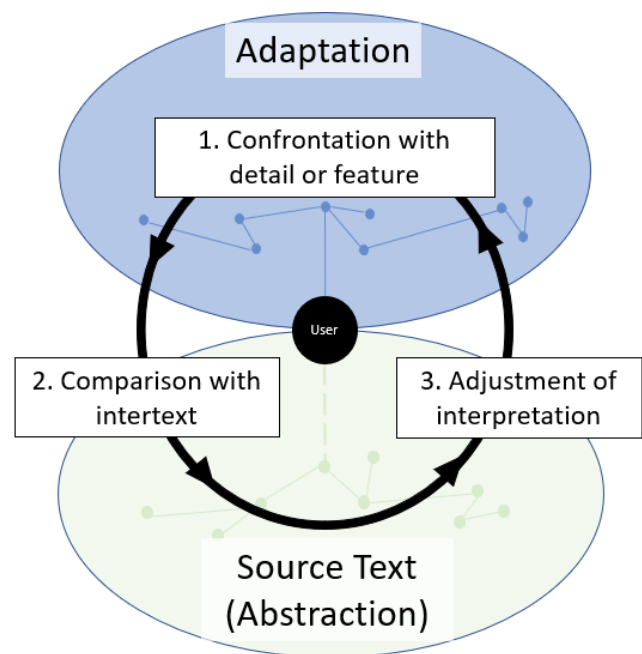


Figure 10 – Loop of Recognition

user's past experience with Shakespeare's text and its many adaptations. The process that involves the interactions between the user, the text, and their understanding of the text's source is what might be referred to as a *loop of recognition* (Figure 10):

1. User is confronted with a narrative detail or formal feature in an adaptation.

2. The user compares this detail or feature with their abstraction of the text being adapted.
3. The user adjusts their interpretation of and expectations for the adaptation (and occasionally their abstraction) accordingly

After being presented with a description of Hamlet Sr. as being “really good at naps,” for example, a user familiar with other versions of *Hamlet* may come to compare this detail with their own conception of King Hamlet (the noble, deceased King of Denmark) as well as how he relates to the rest of their understanding of *Hamlet* (he dies before the first act). Because the user’s notions of *Hamlet* are cobbled together from their experience with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and its adaptations, this act of recognition may involve simultaneously comparing this detail with details in multiple versions of *Hamlet*. Just as the games are defined by the experience of a gameplay loop, so too are adaptations defined by the experience involved with this loop of recognition; just as games are designed to be played, adaptations are designed to be recognized, meaning both noting similarities but also constantly re-cognizing and reinterpreting the adaptation and its source.

Of course, as implied earlier when situating adaptation against other intertextual processes such as genre formation, this loop of recognition may be said to be occurring in regard to genre as well. After all, what is dissonant about being confronted with Hamlet Sr. at the beginning of the digital gamebook is not just that it references a part of *Hamlet*’s tragic plot in a comedic tone (whatever it means to be “good at naps,” being poisoned in one’s sleep is probably not it), but that Hamlet Sr. is available as a playable character at all. This implies a secondary loop of recognition operating alongside the loop of recognition between *To Be or Not to Be* and the user’s abstraction of *Hamlet*, one that links *To Be or Not to Be* with the user’s understanding

of genre conventions within “choose-your-own-adventure”-style gamebooks. The choice to “play” as a character whom the player recognizes will almost certainly die is dissonant with the conventions of this genre – an abstraction derived from multiple digital and non-digital games with similar core gameplay loops – and implies that the character will have some sort of chance to avoid his fate or else will not be imperiled at all. While this generic loop of recognition thus adds to the user’s experience of the text, we might consider it secondary in the same way that lesser-used gameplay loops are. Just as the core loop of a game is the cycle of game actions that occur most often during the experience of play, the core loop of recognition is the intertextual comparison made most often during the experience of engaging with the text. To treat a text as an adaptation of a particular source (rather than as an exemplar of a genre or transmedia storyworld, or even a film or game on its own) is to prioritize this loop in one’s analysis.

Hierarchies aside, a game adaptation’s gameplay loops and loops of recognition feed into each other (Figure 11): recognizing that King Hamlet inevitably dies in *Hamlet* and that the

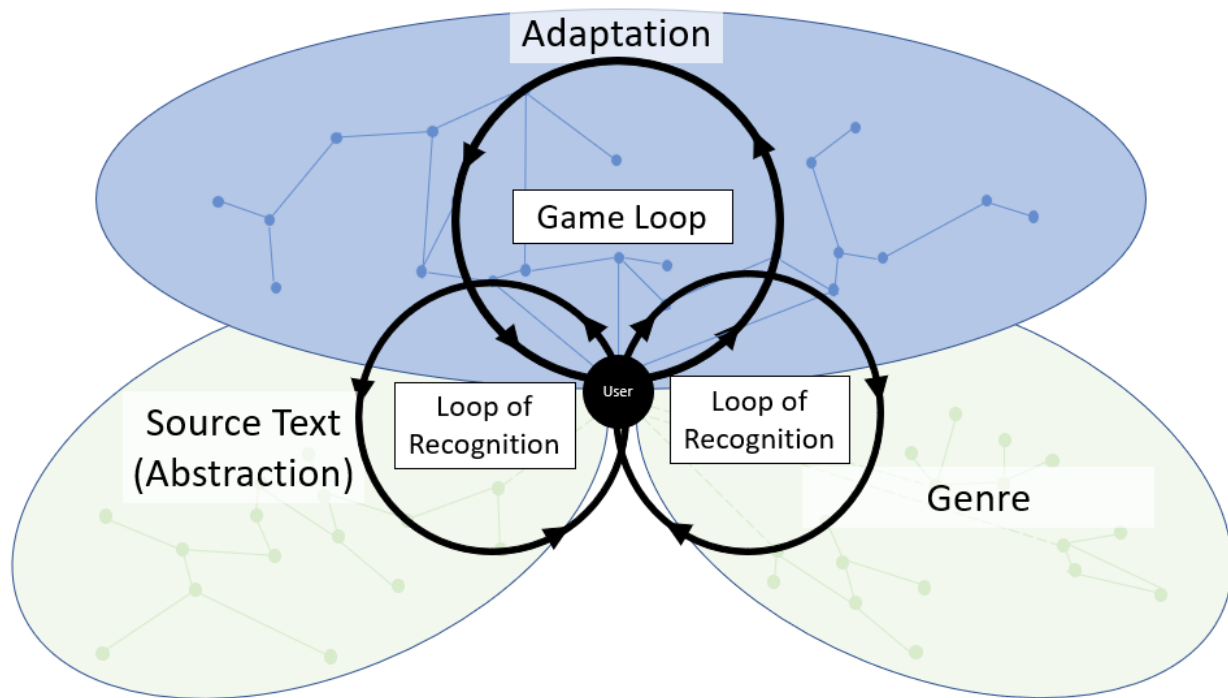


Figure 11 – Intersecting loops of recognition and gameplay

death of player characters (at least in this genre) are seldom so inevitable does change the decisions the player is tempted to make (or perhaps avoid) during play. At the very least, the interactions between these systems bolster the gameplay aesthetic of discovery in *To Be or Not To Be*, turning the experience into a farcical and sometimes morbid exploration of possible outcomes rather than a high-stakes challenge or tragic drama. By the same token, the mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics making up a gameplay loop also feed into the interpretative process of recognition so essential to the experience of engaging with an adaptation. Despite the apparent freedom given to the player by the ability to choose the outcome of the narrative, players are reminded at every turn that they are powerless against the power of North's narrator, who seems to revel in his ability to control the narrative (announcing that, despite giving Hamlet "+1 to magic" declares that it "will never be mentioned again as of right...NOW!") and even mocks certain choices the player makes (calling the choice to not make Hamlet Sr. return as a ghost as "not even a good one, and. . . the last decision you'll ever make"). *To Be or Not to Be's* obsession with the power of an unseen narrator to determine gameplay choices – often involving whether to be or not to be "true" to the events of Shakespeare's tragedy – alludes obliquely to Hamlet's own internal struggles with "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" as described in his soliloquy (*Hamlet* 3.1.1751).

Although this particular interpretation may not be initially convincing to those who have played North's game (indeed, the whimsy and sarcasm of his writing tends to downplay the darker implications of this mechanic) the example proves to illustrate the ways that formal structures, narrative elements, and intertexts can operate together in game adaptations as a system from which experiences arise. When seen in this capacity, literary game adaptations present an opportunity for those inexperienced with games to identify how their unique formal

traits – mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics derived from player action – can be used to express, perform, and reinterpret ideas contained within pieces of literature. Due to their explicit connections to canonical sources, literary game adaptations thus provide a useful entry point into game analysis for both students and scholars who have been taught in traditional methods of close reading. But this complementary relationship between game adaptations and literary texts works in the opposite direction as well: with the right instruction and an attention to game mechanics, a game adaptation like *To Be or Not to Be* can encourage players to ask their own questions of the text it represents. How might the game’s emphasis on the agency of canonically “doomed” characters – after all, even Hamlet and Ophelia are destined to die by the conventions of the tragedy – relate to Shakespeare’s own depictions of human agency? How might the existence of an overly controlling narrator reflect upon Early Modern conceptions of fate and divine providence? And what might the existence of so many “potential” outcomes tell us about the role of narrative suspense within the genre of tragedy? Such questions (and the pursuit of their answers) are the lifeblood of textual scholarship, and this project contends that presenting an interpretatively generative framework like the systems approach to game adaptation can only help further our understanding of games, adaptations, and the textuality in general.

As tempting as it may be to delve deeper into the labyrinth of Shakespearean parody that is North’s *To Be or Not to Be* and its connections to *Hamlet* scholarship, such an exploration lies outside the scope of this project. Besides, the relatively simple mechanics of a choose-your-own-adventure style gamebook may not prove to be the best choice for an in-depth discussion of game adaptations as expressive systems from which unique interpretative and aesthetic experiences emerge. While the systems approach may resist the hierarchy of value established by a strict interpretation of “fidelity,” it still allows room to acknowledge that some texts afford

richer interpretations than others (especially when the scholar's secondary goal is to illustrate a particular methodology). Still, the questions raised by *To Be or Not To Be*'s emphasis on player agency, noncanonical narrative outcomes, and the sometimes adversarial relationship between players and game systems (as represented by the snarky narrator) are certainly subjects worth exploring. To that end, the next chapter will map the concepts of knowledge, agency, and fidelity on a slightly more complex game adaptation, one that is based on the work of an English author who in turn drew inspiration from bards much older than Shakespeare: J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*.

Chapter 2:

A Game of Riddles: Knowledge, Experience, and the Fidelity in *The Hobbit*

He knew, of course, that the riddle-game was sacred and of immense antiquity, and even wicked creatures were afraid to cheat when they played at it. But he felt he could not trust this slimy thing to keep any promise in a pinch.

-J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (126-127)

Having escaped his goblin captors, the hairy-footed adventurer Bilbo Baggins finds himself lost within the deep, dark, stuffy passages in the heart of the Misty Mountains. Every path he takes seems to drive him further into the tangled labyrinth, and every step risks another run-in with a patrolling goblin. Each of the chambers he comes across seems identical to the last until he finally stumbles upon something he has never seen before: a valuable golden ring laying unattended in the dark. He has just enough time to pick it up before a slimy subterranean creature named Gollum enters, muttering something about losing its precious “birthday present.” Suddenly, the creature snatches the ring from Bilbo’s grasp and poses a devious riddle to the frightened hobbit, who knows a wrong answer could cost him his life: “Which is the animal that has four legs in the morning, two at midday, and three in the evening?” Upon receiving the correct answer to its query (“Man”), Gollum simply drops the ring and heads north into the darkness. Bilbo, still lost, retrieves the trinket and follows the creature into the next room, only to be robbed once again and presented with the same riddle. Growing tired of this game, the hobbit slices through Gollum with his glowing sword, reclaims the ring that clatters to the floor, and uses the creature’s slimy corpse as a landmark to aid in navigating the rest of the underground maze.

Any reader familiar with famous “Riddles in the Dark” sequence as portrayed in J.R.R. Tolkien’s 1937 novel *The Hobbit* would be quick to point out that this particular retelling is an unfaithful one. What this charge of infidelity actually means, however, is a riddle in and of itself.

Generally speaking, when someone claims that an adaptation is not “faithful” to its source material, they mean that the differences between the adaptation and the source text it claims to be adapting – or, more accurately, the viewer’s personal understanding of this source text – are more significant and/or more numerous than the similarities. To support their arguments, those who make claims about an adaptation’s fidelity might cite a list of altered, added, or omitted details on the level of plot, style, and tone, the aggregate of which mark the adaptation as being significantly divergent from the source material. These details will necessarily carry different weight for different people based on their knowledge of and attachment to the source text. The fact that the literary Gollum never asks Bilbo the specific riddle reproduced above, for example, may not register as particularly divergent to those with a passing familiarity of Tolkien’s novel.¹⁶ The usually bumbling protagonist’s casual act of murder, on the other hand, is likely to be weighed much more heavily as evidence of infidelity, especially for those who know Gollum’s role in Tolkien’s later works. Of course, an adaptation’s faithfulness seldom relies on plot details alone: such details might point to larger underlying interpretations of a source text’s overall character or “spirit,” embodied in formal characteristics (Tolkien’s Old-English inspired rhymes), tone (a light-hearted adventure), or overall themes or message (one of mercy and pity rather than nonchalant violence). Playing by these rules, however, a hypothetical fidelity critic may be surprised to learn that the above retelling of the riddle contest between Gollum and Bilbo remains a resolutely faithful adaptation of the events of *The Hobbit*; it just happens to be the *Hobbit* authored by a player of Beam Software’s 1982 text-adventure game of the same title rather than the *Hobbit* authored by Tolkien.

This admittedly sophisticated answer to the riddle of the faithful/unfaithful anecdote illustrates some of the problems with the discourse of fidelity in the context of adaptation studies.

Although it is true that the opening anecdote accurately paraphrases (and sometimes directly quotes) a gameplay transcript of Beam Software's *Hobbit*, claiming it is a faithful adaptation says little about either the game itself or its complicated relationship to the texts that influenced it (Tolkien's novel included). But the same could be said of *any* claim regarding an adaptation's supposed "faithfulness" to a single source text: such discourse reduces the dynamic, interpretative process of engaging with an adaptation into a binary, often morally-inflected judgment that in and of itself says very little about how the adaptation operates as a text. It is in its tendency to close off meaning that the problem with fidelity lies. The reason that so-called "fidelity criticism" has become the bugbear of adaptation scholarship, after all, has little to do with the act of citing differing details between an adaptation and its source text in order to make claims regarding how each ought to be interpreted. Instead, the issue arises from the moral judgment implied by the language of faithfulness, purity, and the implied violation of a source: the sentiment that "the original was better." At best, this sentiment serves as an inarguable and thus rather uninteresting thesis on its own; at worst, it promotes a fallacious hierarchy of art that elevates classics of older media over new interpretations presented in a different medium. This is the same cultural elitism that has hounded the study of popular culture objects since at least the advent of film.¹⁷ While potentially valid as personal opinion, then, fidelity criticism is perhaps best left out of an academic setting.

However, when literary texts are rendered into the medium of games – expressive, dynamic systems that are designed to be played and which afford player agency and multiple outcomes – the concept of fidelity becomes even more complicated and (as this chapter will argue) worthy of re-examination. First, because the experience of gameplay is often defined by a core "gameplay loop" – that is, the sequence of actions most commonly performed by players

during the course of the game – rather than narrative tropes, game adaptations reveal the ways that genre operates as a mediating force in adaptation. In some cases, those designing game adaptations must choose between being “true” to a source text or “true” to the genre in which their game is situated, whose gameplay aesthetics may be consonant or dissonant with the themes of the source text itself. Secondly, because games frequently put players in the role of fictional protagonists, game adaptations highlight the gap between a user’s experience of a text’s plot and storyworld and the protagonist’s experience of a text’s plot and storyworld. Adapting a literary text into a game involves finding ways to not only get players inside the mindset of a protagonist, but also to reconcile an informed player’s knowledge of the source text with compelling puzzles, challenges, and other gameplay experiences. Finally, because games afford their players the ability to make choices, act upon those choices, and face consequences of failure within a constantly changing system, game adaptations illustrate the impossibility of “true” fidelity in ways that adaptations in other media do not. The encounter with Gollum portrayed above, after all, is based on only one playthrough of the virtually infinite possible iterations of Beam Software’s *Hobbit*; if the player had chosen to be cautious rather than murderous or if the game had randomly selected a different question for Gollum to ask (some of Tolkien’s riddles are included within the code), one might have ended up with a series of events much like the ones depicted in Tolkien’s novel. Under such circumstances, what is our hypothetical fidelity critic to make of the game as a whole? Is it actually faithful to the novel, unfaithful, both, or neither?

By posing questions like these, I am not attempting to retread old ground. As explained in the previous chapter, adaptation theorists have been pushing against fidelity criticism since the beginning of the discipline. This is why many adaptation theorists have either called for new

theoretical formulations to replace the notion of fidelity (as Robert Stam does in *Literature and Film*) or proposed making explicit those questions about the relationship between an adaptation and its source(s) that fidelity discourse often conceals (as Thomas Leitch does in *Film Adaptation and its Discontents*). The task of this chapter is to extend these calls for action into the realm of game adaptations, building upon the systems approach introduced in the last chapter to investigate both a new trope for the relationship between adaptations and their sources (the trope of the riddle) and a new set of questions about adaptation that the unique properties of games make plain. Aside from providing an avenue into the systems approach, conceiving of game adaptations through the lens of the riddle emphasizes the ways in which many game adaptations' relationships to their sources are affected by mechanical genre conventions, the role of the user as active agent, and a playful approach to a gameplay experience that Bernard Suits has called a "lusory attitude." This in turn raises questions about adaptation often concealed by fidelity discourse, namely to what source and for which user is a text "faithful," and where the value in such engagement lies. Pursuing these questions about genre, user agency, and playful (re)interpretation by examining game adaptations of *The Hobbit* can better illuminate the thesis of this project: that by viewing the act of engaging with adaptations as interfacing with a dynamic, interpretative system rather than consuming a product and making a judgment based on "fidelity" alone, we can better understand the potential that game adaptations (and adaptations of all kinds) have to defamiliarize stories, change our perspectives, and help us play with texts and culture.

In the case of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* – a text whose history of revision already testifies to the confounding presence of the questions of genre, the role of the user, and playful (re)interpretation articulated above – the trope of the riddle actually serves as both an illustrative

vector of analysis and as a structuring logic for the game adaptations that came after it, especially Beam Software's *The Hobbit*. By this I mean, first, that the game's genre resonates with Tolkien's own riddling work, as its conventions and mechanics afford multiple solutions and a question/answer structure that needs to be worked through to be solved. As Adam Roberts suggests in *The Riddles of The Hobbit*, Tolkien's book and the text adventure game based on it can both be productively read through the lens of the riddle. But I also wish to go further and claim that the relationship between the game and its source text is one of riddle-like irony rather than "faithful" mimesis, and that this perspective is a more productive way of examining a medium based upon player choice and possibility. By examining how Beam Software and other game developers have adapted Tolkien's "Riddles in the Dark" sequence through the lens of various game genres, this chapter will show how game adaptations can bridge the gap between a player's extradiegetic experience of a text and the experience of a fictional character internal to the text's world. Game adaptations do so by re-presenting the source text as a system of narrative possibilities created by the actions of interacting elements rather than a set of discrete events. An attention to how this system is structured through game mechanics can encourage players to reinterpret the familiar text in light of those possibilities that were *not* pursued by the protagonist, an often playful interpretative process which – like the act of working through a riddle – can add further layers of meaning to how both the source text and its adaptations operate.

Genre, Fidelity, and (Re)Writing *The Hobbit*

Aside from its thematic use of riddles, the reason this chapter focuses on *The Hobbit* in particular rather than the whole of Tolkien's mythos as portrayed in the later *Lord of the Rings* series is because of (rather than in spite of) the novel's marginal and sometimes conflicting

relationship to Tolkien's larger storyworld. Like all texts, *The Hobbit* is never only one thing: instead, it draws meaning from the multiple discourses in which it takes part. *The Hobbit* is not merely a story about the travails of a particular hairy-footed adventurer, but also a cornerstone of the fantasy genre, a piece of children's literature, and (as multiple dustjackets have proclaimed over the years) the "enchancing prelude to the *Lord of the Rings*."¹⁸ Each of these identities function as a way of examining *The Hobbit* and its adaptations, but the true value of a systems approach to adaptation is the way it emphasizes how meaning emerges from the *interactions between* these discourses. This constellation of identities becomes even more complex when *The Hobbit* is adapted into games, becoming not only a playable system but also a member of a specific game genre with its own conventions and player expectations. As we will see later in this chapter, the experience of Beam Software's *The Hobbit* arises from the collision between *The Hobbit* as a well-known story, *The Hobbit* as the experiences of its protagonist, and *The Hobbit* as an innovative twist on the text adventure game genre. But one might be surprised to learn that Tolkien's original novel is just as torn in its allegiance to the multiple generic and intertextual discourses in which it takes part. To understand why, we need to take a closer look at the complicated publication history of the book's fifth chapter, "Riddles in the Dark," which is as iconic as it is illustrative of the unique challenges involved in making game adaptations.

According to Humphrey Carpenter's biography of Tolkien, the story of the "Riddles in the Dark" chapter as most readers know it today actually begins in December 1937, after the first edition of *The Hobbit* had been published and generally well-received. Tolkien's publisher, Stanley Unwin, asked him to begin work on a sequel, one that would directly follow the fairy-tale quest of the reluctant hero Bilbo Baggins as he and his companions (including the wise wizard Gandalf and the dwarven prince Thorin) journey across a world of magic and monsters.

After having his idea of *The Quenta Silmarillion* – an epic history of a mythical realm called Arda he had been dreaming up for years – shot down on account of Unwin’s belief that the public “wanted more about hobbits,” Tolkien began the arduous task of drafting the tentatively titled *New Hobbit*. Originally, Tolkien had planned to retain both the whimsical tone and overall structure of its predecessor by centering the narrative on the wanderlust-fueled exploits of Bilbo after he had spent all his hard-earned treasure. But in his extensive drafting process, Tolkien was continually drawn to one particular piece of loot from the original novel whose origins had remained mysterious: a golden ring that turns its user invisible. Borrowing elements from his as-yet unrealized mythic history, Tolkien forged this artifact into the One Ring, a powerful object containing the dark spirit of a great evil that corrupts all but the strongest of souls. The quest to destroy this ring in the fires from which it was made and thus bring salvation to Middle Earth became the new driving force of the project, one which would eventually expand in scale to include ancient histories, powerful magic, and battles of epic proportions. The trilogy of novels that resulted from this new direction for *The New Hobbit* would later become known as *The Lord of the Rings* (1955), perhaps the most influential work of fantasy literature in the 20th century.

But in a hole in the plot, there lay a problem. The riddle contest contained within Tolkien’s first edition of *The Hobbit* (and, in fact, the book as a whole) does very little to characterize the One Ring as a corrupting artifact that bends users to its will, nor does the book’s fairy-tale tone portray the weight of the sequel’s coming conflicts. Its unassuming description of “a tiny ring of cold metal” is buried in a paragraph of Bilbo’s miserableness at being away from a comfortable fire and a warm meal, and he thinks very little of it when picking it up by chance (Tolkien 115). Soon after, Bilbo is ambushed by the object’s original owner: Gollum, a slimy, prowling creature with a taste for meat. Oddly enough, Gollum – a creature who in later books is

so obsessed with the One Ring that he ends up biting off the new wearer's finger and falling with it into a fiery chasm in a vain attempt to reclaim his treasure – freely offers the artifact as a prize for a game of riddles (121). Gollum and Bilbo go back and forth trying to stump each other with Old-English-style rhyming riddles until Bilbo unwittingly presents an unsolvable riddle as his fumbling fingers brush across the ring he recently picked up: “What have I got in my pocket?” (125). Despite pointing out its unfairness as a riddle (something even Bilbo realizes [127]), Gollum tries and fails to answer the question and consequently loses the game. To honor his word, the creature attempts to collect his “present” to give to the newcomer, completely unaware that the hobbit already picked it up. Rather than feel suspicion and anger upon not finding his precious treasure, the Gollum of the first edition is extremely apologetic, repeatedly begging Bilbo's pardon and saying, “we didn't mean to cheat, we meant to give it our only only [sic] present [sic], if it won the competition” (129). With feigned disappointment, Bilbo asks to be led out of the caverns as a consolation prize and the two part ways on relatively amicable terms.

Receiving such a helpful trinket from a dangerous but polite creature via a riddle contest is common in the myths and fairy tales from which Tolkien drew inspiration, but the depiction of Gollum and the Ring proved to be troublingly dissonant with the central conceit of his new epic trilogy. Unlike the future protagonist of *The Lord of the Rings*, Bilbo uses the Ring's power of invisibility multiple times throughout the story without any inkling of its evil nature or corrupting influence, nor does Gollum or anyone else pursue him for it. In addition, the book as a whole is rather light-hearted compared to the epic histories and high-stakes conflicts of *The Lord of the Rings*, with its abundance of comic scenes (including a trio of dim-witted trolls bickering in cockney accents about how best to cook dwarves [79]), world-breaking anachronisms (such as a tangent on how the game of golf was invented after a legendary hobbit “knocked [the goblin]

king Golfimbul's head clean off with a wooden club" [48]), and jovial storybook narrator, who follows one of Gollum's life-and-death riddles with a gentle metatextual chiding of the reader: "I imagine you know the answer, of course, or can guess it easy as winking, since you are sitting comfortably at home and have not the danger of being eaten to disturb your thinking" (123-124). Given the discrepancies between the first edition of his novel and his vision for a new trilogy set in the same world, Tolkien was thus presented with a riddle-like quandary of his own: should he remain "true" to the fairy-tale style narrative of the original *Hobbit*, or "true" to the nature and tone of the growing storyworld of which it was a part?

Before addressing Tolkien's response to this dilemma, it would be valuable to frame it in terms of the systems approach at the heart of this project. A reader engaging with the first edition of *The Hobbit* before the *Lord of the Rings* novels have even been composed is engaging with a relatively closed intertextual system: the characters, items, and events of *The Hobbit* – not to mention the lore and tone of the greater fictional storyworld in which it takes place ("Middle Earth" or "Arda") – cannot be compared to their direct depictions in adaptations or other related

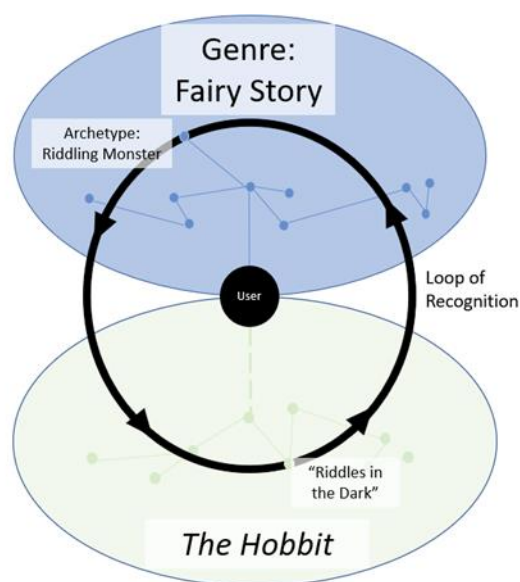


Figure 12 – Intertextual interactions between *The Hobbit* and the "fairy story" genre

works because those texts do not yet exist. However, as the phrase "relatively closed" implies, *The Hobbit* draws its meaning from a variety of discourses, including the genre of "fairy stories" and the Anglo-Saxon/Norse myths which inspired Tolkien's worldbuilding (Figure 12). Readers familiar with

these discourses might interpret the narrator's metatextual whimsy as fitting within the oral tradition of folktales, or connect Gollum with other dangerous yet rule-abiding riddlers from myth such as Rumpelstiltskin or the Oedipal Sphinx, and connections like these can shape their experiences and understandings of *The Hobbit*. However, when the literary and narrative elements of *The Hobbit* are re-depicted in another series of texts set in the same world, a new experience of comparison and recognition opens up for readers. Although *The Lord of the Rings* is not technically an adaptation of *The Hobbit*, the looping process of comparing details depicted in both is central to experiencing *The Hobbit* as a prelude to the *Lord of the Rings*. When compared to their depictions in the later series, story elements like Gollum or the Ring and stylistic elements like comical anachronisms and a playful narrator can produce a sense of dissonance within the system (Figure 13).

Partly due to an unexpected intervention by his editor, Tolkien managed to do both. Initially, Tolkien chose to bring *The Hobbit* in line with *The Lord of the Rings*, beginning with significant changes to the "Riddles in the Dark" sequence summarized above. He excised all

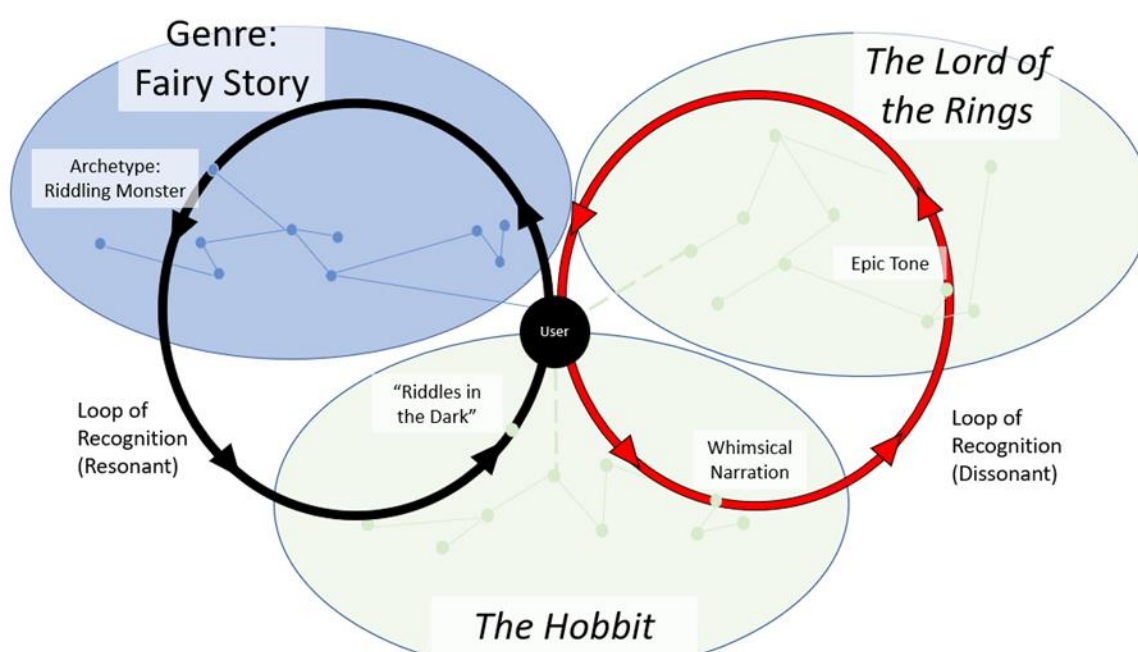


Figure 13 – Intertextual interactions between *The Hobbit*, genre, and *The Lord of the Rings*

notions of Gollum offering to give away his precious Ring, replacing it with a promise of showing Bilbo the way out (121). Tolkien also rewrote Gollum to be much more devious: in the new version, Gollum never plans to keep his promise upon being tricked by Bilbo's final (admittedly unfair) question and tries instead to find the Ring so he can strangle and eat the hobbit from the shadows (127). The original Gollum's apologetic disappointment in not being able to find his prized possession is turned into a "cursing and wailing" in this edition (128), which quickly evolves into "such a rage of loss and suspicion ... that no sword had any more terror for him" (130). Bilbo only survives the creature's subsequent attack because the Ring "quietly slipped on to his groping forefinger" as if of its own accord, foreshadowing the evil intent of the object that will act as a large part of the later trilogy (130).

These versions of Gollum and Bilbo do not part ways amicably, either: only by chasing the now-livid Gollum through the twisting tunnels does Bilbo find the exit (132). Gollum then stands menacingly at the bottleneck, forcing the invisible (but now cornered) hobbit into a moment of indecision as he decides whether to kill the creature in order to save his own skin or spare the creature's life and risk rushing past him (133). His pity for the miserable creature eventually wins out over self-preservation, and only through a literal leap of faith Bilbo is able to escape the howling creature's grasp (133). Aside from adding a bit of drama to the otherwise generic fairy tale formula, this passage foreshadows some of the thematic moral struggles at the heart of the later trilogy. Like Bilbo, the next Ring-bearer must resist base emotions like fear and selfishness (associated with the influence of the Ring) in favor of moral ideals like forgiveness and mercy. Given that Gollum goes on to inadvertently destroy the Ring at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* by biting off its bearer's finger and tumbling into a chasm, Bilbo's act of pity in a very real sense allows the events of *The Lord of the Rings* to occur. Although they did not undo

many of the novel's inconsistencies in worldbuilding or avuncular tone alluded to above, these changes – published in the 1951 edition of *The Hobbit* and every edition since – helped to integrate *The Hobbit* with *The Lord of the Rings* both narratively and thematically.

It is worth noting, however, that Tolkien's attempts to bring *The Hobbit* into line with his epic storyworld did not end with his revisions to a single chapter. In fact, according to Carpenter's biography, Tolkien had actually submitted the revised "Riddles in the Dark" chapter as described above to his publisher as an example of more sweeping revisions he would need to bring the quick-paced and generally light-hearted *Hobbit* in line with the dense worldbuilding and serious tone of his later epic works. It was only after galley proofs were sent across the author's desk that he realized these changes had been incorporated wholesale into a new edition (Carpenter 217). It would not be until 1960 (five years after *Lord of the Rings* was published) that Tolkien would take on a more expansive rewrite, attempting to wrangle the geographical features and timeline of the meandering journey into a precise map and itinerary, excise many of the charming anachronisms of the original, and emphasize the brewing conflicts that would take place in *The Lord of the Rings* by shifting the point of view from Bilbo to his more worldly companions. The resulting work, as someone in Tolkien's circle reportedly described it, was "wonderful, but . . . not *The Hobbit*" (Rateliff 812). Even in the first dozen pages of his rewrite – parts of which were eventually published posthumously under the sober title of "The Quest of Erebor" in *Unfinished Tales* (1980) – friends noted that most of the novel's original whimsy and quick-paced plot had been lost in Tolkien's quest to align it with the more serious tone and stakes of its sequels. Many reviewers would come to agree with this after the full drafts were published in John D. Rateliff's 2007 *History of the Hobbit*, noting that the shift in perspective "had the unfortunate effect of making Bilbo seem increasingly ridiculous" (Shippey 216) and

that although “the much-derided avuncular asides are gone ... so is the vitality” (Charlton). Fortunately for these critics, Tolkien abandoned the rewrite two chapters in, making only minor adjustments to language in the years after. As a result, *The Hobbit* as we know it today retained its tonal inconsistencies with Tolkien’s sequels in order to remain “faithful” to the already-revised 1951 version – which, of course, is not entirely “original” in the first place.

While this anecdote reveals both the distorting influence of genre discourses on rewrites and complicates the notion of originality that underlies fidelity criticism, what is perhaps more interesting is how Tolkien – in a move reminiscent of his rule-bending protagonist – attempted to recast his revisions to “Riddles in the Dark” as being part of his larger narrative all along. In the prologue to *The Fellowship of the Ring* (the first book of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, published 1954), Tolkien’s narrator not only reveals that Bilbo’s original account of his meeting with Gollum (i.e. the one in *The Hobbit*’s first edition) was troublingly false, but implies that this falsehood is the result of Bilbo’s own growing obsession with the corrupted object:

Now it is a curious fact that this is not the story as Bilbo first told it to his companions. To them his account was that Gollum had promised to give him a *present*, if he won the game. . . . This account Bilbo set down in his memoirs, and he seems never to have altered it himself. . . . But many copies contain the true account (as an alternative), derived no doubt, from notes by Frodo or Samwise [protagonists of *The Lord of the Rings*], both of whom learned the truth, though they seem to have been unwilling to delete anything actually written by the old hobbit himself. . . . Though he did not say so to Bilbo, [Gandalf] also thought it important, and disturbing, to find that the good hobbit had not told the truth from the first: quite contrary to his habit (*Fellowship of the Ring* 33).

By framing *The Hobbit* as being authored by an unreliable narrator, his passage calls into question not only the events as portrayed in a single chapter of the first edition, but the events of every chapter of every edition. If Bilbo could have lied about his run-in with Gollum, he could easily have embellished every part of the book. Even if being untruthful is “quite contrary to his habit” – which, judging by his willingness to bend the rules of Gollum’s riddle contest even in

his original version of events, is a rather suspect characterization of Bilbo – he easily could have concealed darker or embarrassing parts of reality using the comic whimsy and avuncular asides so central to the genre of oral folktales and fairy stories. This essentially changes *The Hobbit's* relationship to its storyworld: no longer is it a mimetic representation of events as they played out, but an ironic description of them, one warped by the influence of genre conventions and the agency of an unreliable narrating character. In other words, Tolkien has “riddled” the text, changing the relationship between what is said within the book and what is true within its storyworld into an enigmatic rather than a straightforward one.

This “riddling” could easily be read as merely a clever (if not overt) attempt by Tolkien at dramatizing his writing process and justifying his act of retroactive continuity, but it also points to a larger truth about *The Hobbit* and its relationship to riddles. As Adam Roberts argues in his monograph *The Riddles of the Hobbit*, “*The Hobbit* is a deeply riddling book,” not only because it *contains* multiple riddles because it acts like a riddle “in a larger, formal sense” (5). Roberts claims that riddles differ from other literary genres in that their relationship to truth is one of “irony rather than mimesis,” a tendency shared by both fantasy literature and the Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon cultures which informed Tolkien’s worldbuilding (4). The riddles like those contained within the 9th century *Exeter Book* or the Icelandic sagas are not just diversions for the Anglo Saxons according to Roberts, but an expression of their worldview. Citing primary sources which embrace the contradictions of battle and religious conversion as well as scholars of the period (including Tolkien himself), Roberts claims that:

the Anglo-Saxon view of life is that it is a riddle not because it can be in some sense ‘solved,’ but because there is an ironic relationship between what is presented and what is meant – between what is to-hand and how things really are. Riddling is the best way to apprehend this irony, because the mismatch is something to be encountered playfully, joyfully, not surily or resentfully (23)

In his initial reframing of *The Hobbit*'s inconsistencies with *The Lord of the Rings* as an account of the world mediated by a character within this world, Tolkien is basically enacting the Anglo-Saxon mindset that informed much of his worldbuilding in the first place. When placed alongside *The Lord of the Rings*, we see in *The Hobbit* an ironic relationship between "what is to-hand and how things really are," just as the genre of fantasy is placed against the real world. The correct response to this seeming discrepancy, as Roberts argues, is to encounter it "playfully, joyfully, not surily or resentfully," to engage with the text by actively asking what such differences could mean instead of disengaging with it by pointing out things which do not match one's expectations. In fact, for Roberts, the act of reading and interpreting fiction itself may be seen as an unriddling, "a process of opening disclosure rather than a narrowing-down enclosure" that can help us see its subject in a new and unfamiliar way (14). By asking not "is the second edition of *The Hobbit* 'faithful' to *The Lord of the Rings*?" but "to which discourse surrounding *The Hobbit* is the second edition attempting to be faithful?", we are essentially applying this playful unriddling mindset to the intertextual systems in which *The Hobbit* takes part.

As the next section will show, I argue that we can take Roberts' claims further, using the form of the literary riddle as a way to understand not only *The Hobbit* and its game adaptations, but the systems approach to adaptations as a whole. Doing so will require sketching a conception of the riddle that will simultaneously help illustrate and problematize the conception of games and adaptations as expressive systems introduced in the last chapter. I aim to show that due to its particular relationship to a referent and an implicit set of governing rules driven by the "lusory attitude" of its players, the form of the literary riddle shares a great deal of functional similarities with both adaptations and games. Examining these similarities not only serves as a way to understand the systems approach to game adaptations at the core of this project, but also

foregrounds questions regarding the relationship between game adaptations, their sources, and their players that will be explored in the rest of the chapter. Specifically, the rule-bound and knowledge-dependent form of the riddle brings to light the questions that Tolkien struggled with in his rewriting above: to what (genre conventions or narrative continuity) and for whom (a knowing audience or Bilbo's experience as narrated) is an adaptation "faithful" or "true"? Again, the point of asking such questions is not to determine some literal form of truth, but to initiate a playful activity that can be as interpretatively productive as it is entertaining. This notion of the riddle, in many ways, is the key to understanding both game adaptations of *The Hobbit* and game adaptations more generally.

On Riddles and Game Adaptations

Like the terms "game" and "adaptation", the concept of the riddle is as familiar as it is difficult to define. Riddles, wordplay, and otherwise enigmatic queries are widespread across time and culture, from Hebrew scriptures and Nordic *kennings*, from Vedic mantras to Buddhist *koans*, and from Indigenous folktales to playground banter. Writing in the June 2018 issue of *Humanities*, Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj notes that despite the numerous definitions presented by folklorists, linguists, and philosophers since at least Aristotle, "not a single riddle definition has yet gone into general circulation, and many a scholar has felt the need to express terminological reservations and to create a personal definition within the context of the culture under study" (6). With this in mind, I turn to the structural definition of a riddle presented by Robert A. Georges and Alan Dundes in their 1961 article on the subject as a tentative starting point for this project: "a riddle is a traditional verbal expression which contains one or more descriptive elements, a pair of which may be in opposition; the referent of these elements is to be

guessed” (113). As with all structural definitions, the value in Georges and Dundes’ conception of the riddle within the context of this project is not necessarily in the definition as written: though a useful heuristic for folkloric riddles, the authors have made it intentionally broad in order to include riddles that fall outside previous definitions (113). Instead, its usefulness arises from examining what is implied within the definition and what questions arise when it is read against the concepts of games and adaptations.

As an example, we can apply this definition to two of the riddles uttered by Bilbo and Gollum within Tolkien’s novel:

*Thirty white horses on a red hill,
First the champ,
Then they stamp,
Then they stand still.*

. . .

*Voiceless it cries,
Wingless flutters,
Toothless bites,
Mouthless mutters* (121-122).

Both of these riddles fit within Georges and Dundes’ definition. Their rhyming meter and figurative language mark them as “traditional verbal expressions,” both within the context of Tolkien’s fictional world (the narrator describes the first riddle as a “rather old one” and Bilbo is only able to answer the second because “he had once heard something like this before” [Tolkien 121-122]) and the world of the reader (the first is adapted from a common nursery rhyme, and the second draws from elements found in traditional Old English and Norse riddles). Also in line with Georges and Dundes, each of the riddles reproduced above describes an unspecified referent (“teeth” and “wind,” respectively) using distinct “descriptive elements,” some of which are in opposition (“voiceless” / “crying”) and some which are not (“thirty white horses” / “red hill”).

While discussions of tradition and opposition are important to Georges and Dundes' structuralist taxonomy of traditional English riddles as presented in their paper, these features are less important when examining riddles as a structuring logic for game adaptations; I bring them up here only to foreground the crucial role that knowledge plays in the literary form of the riddle, both for one who presents the riddle (the "riddler") and for the one to whom it is presented (the "riddlee"). Understanding the central position of knowledge within the riddle form requires an examination of how the referent-dependent and rule-bound process implied by the latter part of Georges and Dundes' definition – "the referent of these elements is to be guessed" (113) – resonates with the way adaptations, games, and game adaptations operate.

The clause "the referent of these elements is to be guessed" implies, first, that riddles are defined by their relationship (and thus their audience's relationship) to a referent, a trait they share with adaptations. After all, if the passages from Tolkien quoted above were entirely removed from their fictional and literary contexts – if they were placed alongside the nonsense lyrics of a children's song, for example, or published in a poetry book and titled with their solutions – they might not be read as riddles at all. If a riddle is presented in a context that entirely divorces it from a possible referent (as in the song example) or nullifies its "to-be-guessed-ness" (as in the poem example), it functionally ceases to behave as a riddle. Whether or not a recontextualized passage *is* still a riddle in some ontological sense matters little if the user does not recognize it as something with an unknown referent. In other words, a riddle only becomes so when it is approached *as a riddle*: that is, when its meaning arises from a particular relationship between the riddle and its referent. In this way, riddles are similar to adaptations: as established in the last chapter, to treat an adaptation *as an adaptation* (rather than as a book, film, game, etc.) is to consider it in relation to a particular source text or texts. Both riddles and

adaptations involve the user engaging in what I have called a loop of recognition, a comparison between details of the text in front of the user (the riddle or adaptation) and the details of a specific intertext (the referent or source text, respectively). Just as someone treating a film version of *The Hobbit* as an adaptation might compare an actor playing Bilbo to the book's description of the character, so too does someone trying to solve a riddle compare descriptive elements (stamping horses on a red hill) with a possible solution (a mouthful of teeth). Considering the similarities between these intertext-dependent forms, it is tempting to consider riddles within the systems framework discussed here to be merely adaptations with hidden sources, or (conversely) that adaptations are riddles with their solutions made explicit.

At least initially, blurring the distinctions between riddles and adaptations in this way discounts the differing expectations of a user when approaching each form. To paraphrase an observation from Adam Roberts quoted above, to treat any given text as a riddle is to treat it as an ironic description of some part of the world; to treat a text as an adaptation is to treat it as a mimetic representation of another text (Roberts 4). This means, in the first case, that the relationship between a riddle's descriptive elements and its referent is enigmatic and puzzling rather than straightforward and clear, frequently relying on double entendre or association rather than literal description. Teeth do not literally "champ" or "stamp" like horses do, but the imagery each evokes – a horse impatiently chewing its harness and hooves clacking against the hard ground – is designed to lead the riddlee towards the image of teeth (or, if they guess incorrectly, make them feel foolish for not recognizing this referent earlier). Additionally, as a riddle is usually seen as a description and not a representation of its referent, it is not often faulted for being obtuse or leaving some details out. To criticize Tolkien's teeth riddle for incorrectly citing the number of teeth in an adult's mouth (there are thirty-two rather than thirty) or for not painting

a clear picture of the mouth's anatomy (is the "red hill" the lips? The gums? The tongue?) is to miss the point of the riddle: it is not meant to accurately represent teeth, but to describe them in a round-about way that is pleasurable to decipher. Conversely, as deciphering clues is not typically considered part of the experience of an adaptation, the relation between any given adaptation and its source tends to be more mimetic (i.e. straightforward and imitative) than ironic (enigmatic and figurative). Instead of merely providing an obtuse description like "hairy-foot and the slimy one rallied words until one of them failed to return a volley" in order to conceal its referent, an adaptation of the riddle contest between Bilbo and Gollum would generally tend to represent the events of its source in a straightforward (if not strictly "faithful") way such that the audience can easily recognize its connection to a particular intertext (or, in the case of unknowing audiences, make the narrative so straightforward as to remove any need to seek out a source for further context).

The reason why riddles tend to be ironic descriptions rather than mimetic representations has to do with the second, ludic implication of Georges' and Dundes' assertion that "the referent of these elements is to be guessed" (113). The phrase "to be guessed" implies not only a goal to be achieved, but a competitive context involving at least two "players" – one to do the guessing (the "riddlee") and one to confirm or deny their response ("the riddler") – and a set of unspoken rules governing their interaction. In his 1996 essay "Toward a Theory of the Literary Riddle," Dan Pagis makes this rule-bound relationship between riddlers and riddlees a central part of his analysis of riddles in Hebrew literature, claiming that in order for such a social context to be justly competitive, a true riddle "must be difficult and enigmatic, yet [contain] the clues needed to decipher it" (81). In other words, for a riddle to be "fair," the riddlee must be familiar enough with its referent to decipher it from the clues given, yet not so familiar that the answer is obvious.

If the second of Tolkien's riddles given above, for example, is just a description of some voicelessly-crying and winglessly-fluttering mythical creature that Bilbo has never heard of rather than the all-too familiar "wind," the riddle is made moot, both because it is a literal representation rather than an ironic description and also because the referent lies outside of the riddlee's possible range of knowledge. This is not to say that unsolvable "neck-riddles" like this do not exist in literature (as discussed in the next section, Bilbo stumbles into one in order to best Gollum), but merely that riddles are generally designed to be worked through by the riddlee rather than requiring special knowledge to complete.¹⁹ It is in this way that the riddle acts as a game for Pagis, in which "the author is obliged to pose a riddle tantalizing in its opacity, yet fair in the clues it provides" and "the riddlee is obliged to solve the riddle, to announce the solution and to explain the author's intent with reference to the clues" (84). Pagis observes that the author of a riddle need not be present for the game to occur, as "the author is present in spirit, and often has already confirmed, or discounted, the suggestion of the later reader by leaving him the correct solution in an agreed-on hiding place" (84). Looking up the answer before committing to a guess or skipping the riddle altogether is equivalent to violating the rules of the competitive social context it presents, and deprives the riddlee of "the pleasure of deciphering" that arises from playing this game (84).

If the riddle-game as described above seems more contingent on its player's acceptance of unwritten rules than other games do, that is only because its structure lacks the formality of material elements or refereeing institutions. According to Bernard Suits in his book *The Grasshopper*, the act of playing any game is contingent upon players taking on what he calls a lusory attitude, or a mindset in which "the rules are accepted just because they make possible such an activity [the activity of play]" (41). In order to make possible the activity of engaging

with a riddle, a riddlee must accept both that they must guess the referent by deciphering the riddle's elements on their own and that *there is a referent to be guessed in the first place* – that the elements of the riddle, no matter how strange or contradictory they may appear, all describe an aspect of something familiar yet currently unrecognized. Failing to achieve this lusory attitude (by, say, complaining about the inherent contradictions of the elements or arguing that the one's provided answer is more correct than the riddler's) inhibits the activity of play. The value of a riddle as an activity is not concentrated in its referent – if that were the case, an unimaginative riddler would find looking up the answer or intimidating the riddler to give it up as more efficient options. Instead, Suits' concept of the lusory attitude implies that the value of the riddle is to be found not in its solution, but in the activity of deciphering or “unriddling” the answer via the relatively inefficient means described by the rules; in other words, play itself.

Applying the concept of the lusory attitude to riddles in this way not only deepens our understandings of how riddles work, but also reveals the insufficiency of fidelity criticism as an approach to game adaptations. Approaching game adaptations *as* game adaptations requires a similar lusory attitude to the one that a riddlee takes to a riddle: rather than quibble about whether or not a particular detail is “faithful” to a source text, one ought to accept that these elements are indeed connected to the source in order to make possible the activity of interpretation. For the systems approach described here, the point of engaging with a work is not about “solving” a source text or declaring its meaning once and for all, but about *the activity of interpretation in and of itself*. This should not be taken to mean that all adaptations are equally interesting, or that any text can be productively read as an interpretation of any other – some connections (and the arguments for them) will be more compelling than others. But especially in the case of game adaptations, which have been historically marginalized as having little to no

interpretative depth in regard to their sources, adopting a lusory attitude towards one's object of study can result in a multiplicity of compelling readings and new perspectives on how texts relate to one another. In terms of the systems approach, this means placing more texts in interaction with each other and seeing what arises from their interaction.

Of course, even with an understanding of a lusory attitude, the form of the riddle is still unstable when compared to other games and adaptations. The process of engaging with a riddle involves replacing one possible referent for another until a solution is found – or, in terms of the systems approach, until the loop of recognition results in a concordance between the features of the referent and the descriptive clues given in the text of the riddle. Someone trying to solve Gollum's "wind" riddle quoted above might cycle through possibilities that resonate with the descriptive elements presented to them. The line "voiceless cries" might conjure up the image of a bird, but the flying creature is dissonant with "wingless" from the next line and so must be discarded. The guess of an "eye" might be somewhat harmonious with the details provided in the first two lines (eyelids "flutter," after all), but the connection falls apart when compared with the "biting" or "muttering" of the following lines. If we consider the act of solving a single riddle to be a game, this constant act of comparison and replacement might be considered its core gameplay loop, or the most common actions the player (riddlee) takes during the game (the working through of a riddle). But because this particular game is so dependent on the knowledge of its player, once the guessing game is over, so is the riddle's function as a riddle.²⁰ When a riddlee discovers the solution to a riddle and has it confirmed correct by the riddler, the referent (for them, at least) is no longer "to be guessed." As long as the solution remains in their memory, they can no longer play the game as they did before and thus treat the riddle as a riddle; instead, their future engagement with it is closer to the appreciation of a poetic description of the referent

rather than an engaging guessing game. Looking at riddles as both games and adaptations, in other words, pits the two forms against each other in a way that echoes the discrepancies between narrative and gameplay that have haunted game studies more generally.

Examining riddles in this way— as forms that are based upon their enigmatic relationship to a referent, but also dependent upon a user being able to “solve” them through rule-mediated guessing – situates them as being unstable entities precariously perched on the border between adaptations and games. If the riddle’s referent needs to be discovered through game-like guesses before the loop of recognition can be complete, it cannot function like an adaptation; but once the riddlee solves the riddle, terminating the gameplay loop and being able to interpret its meaning in light of the once-concealed referent, it can no longer function as a game. All of this is contingent upon the knowledge of the riddlee, who must know enough in order to play (i.e. understand the riddle as an enigmatic query requiring an answer they can reasonably provide) but not so much as to make play impossible (i.e. by knowing the correct answer outright). In riddles, like in some game adaptations, the discourses of “game” and “adaptation” are at odds, much like “*The Hobbit* as fairy-story” was at odds with “*The Hobbit* as prelude to the *Lord of the Rings*” during Tolkien’s revision process. The methodology of fidelity criticism alone – the decrying of any deviations from a “dominant” discourse or source – is insufficient in dealing with such cases, as meaning arises from the interactions between these discourses rather than being beholden to one over the other. What is required instead is something akin to Tolkien’s clever alteration of Bilbo’s story within the prologue to *The Fellowship of the Ring* – a playful, enigmatic blurring of the lines between “truth” and “fiction,” between “game” and “adaptation,” based on an attention to the user’s position of knowledge and their relationship to the text’s storyworld.

Being Bilbo: Knowledge and Agency in Four *Hobbit* Game Adaptations

Every edition of Tolkien's *Hobbit* begins, oddly enough, with a disclaimer on philology: "This is a story of long ago. At that time the languages and letters were quite different from ours of today. English is used to represent the languages" (27). Aside from setting up a lesson on dwarven runes (the text actually points out how readers can translate the runes into modern English), this opening temporally and linguistically distances the reader from Tolkien's storyworld. At the same time, this language simultaneously establishes the relationship between the reader and this world by placing the reader as an outside observer learning about this story as an armchair historian would pour over an annotated translation of a historical document. Compare this to the opening of the user manual for Beam Software's *The Hobbit*, which is more explicit but no less complex in its interpellation of its audience. It begins with a direct address ("Congratulations! You are about to play the most sophisticated game program yet devised for the microcomputer") before going on to tell the user of their role in the fictional storyworld ("In THE HOBBIT program, you take on the role of Bilbo, the hobbit") and finally addressing them as if they were the protagonist ("Best of luck Bilbo: may you return with wonderful tales to tell on a cold evening in front of a log fire") (User's Guide 3). While the novel's reader is addressed as an amateur historian investigating a mediated account of a long-lost culture from the safety of their parlors, someone who engages with Beam Software's *Hobbit* is addressed as if this history is yet to be written, and that the one who will determine how this history plays out is not some mythical hero distanced by the barriers of time and language, but *you*, the player, Bilbo Baggins.

One of the challenges of game adaptation stems from the fact that the roles created by these respective texts for their audience – Tolkien's bookworm and Beam Software's Bilbo – have very different relationships to the world in which the fiction takes place and thus very

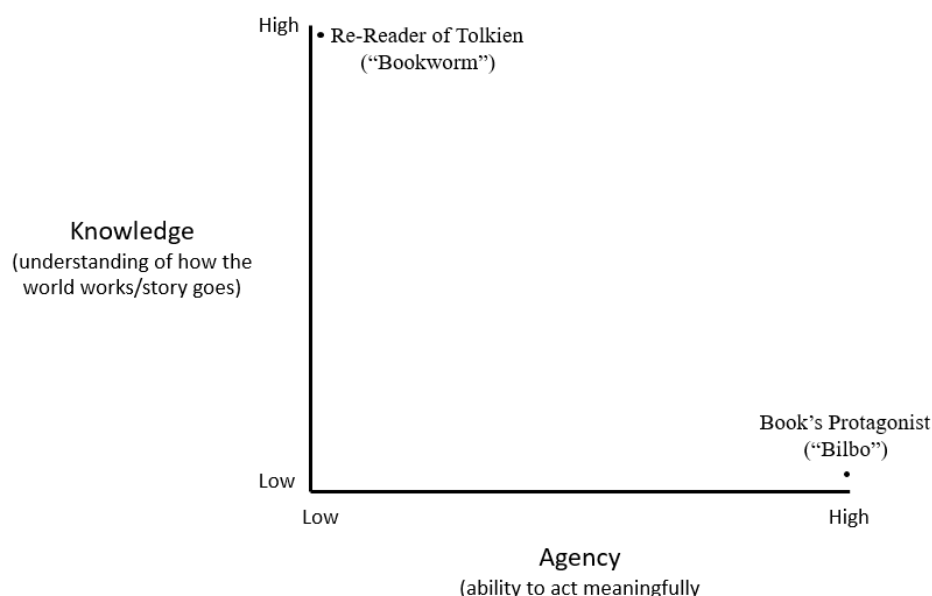


Figure 14 – Player agency vs user knowledge

different experiences of the story itself (Figure 14). For the bookworm, the story of *The Hobbit* exists as a finite sequence of events over which they have no control. Gollum will always ask the same riddles, Bilbo will always give the same answers, and the two will always part ways without bloodshed. Even a first-time reader of Tolkien's novel can draw upon their vast array of knowledge – of Tolkien's later works, the conventions of the fantasy genre, or even just the fact that they are five chapters into a nineteen-chapter book – to form expectations about what is to come. For Bilbo, however, *The Hobbit* is not a story at all: it is a veritable sea of potential dangers and unpredictable outcomes, most of which require him to make choices and take action. Bilbo does not know what riddles Gollum will ask, nor if he is going to be able to answer them, and he certainly cannot be sure that he will emerge unscathed. While Bilbo may have some knowledge a first-time reader does not (as stated above, he happens to have heard one of Gollum's riddles before and understands the sanctity of the riddle-game within Tolkien's fictional world [Tolkien 126-127]), his limited knowledge as a character internal to Tolkien's storyworld marks his experience of the events of *The Hobbit* literally a world apart from an

external observer's engagement with the narrative. This discussion allows us to add a more practical set of questions to the higher-order concepts of riddles, game adaptations, and knowledge as discussed in the previous sections: how does a game adaptation reconcile the high knowledge and low agency of the bookworm with the low knowledge, high agency of the protagonist? In other words, to whose experience of the text is a game adaptation "faithful:" the reader's, the protagonist's, or something in between?

Before exploring examples and implications of the knowledge/agency discrepancies between players and protagonists below, it would be useful to clarify the notions of agency and knowledge as they apply to game adaptations. In her enormously influential work *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, new media theorist Janet Murray describes agency in electronic environments as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (159). Agency in electronic environments, she writes, has the potential to be less contrived or limited than in other forms (say, live theater or improvisational folk dances) due to the computer's ability to react to player input via a complex set of rules. This automated complexity results in "a world that is dynamically altered by our participation" rather than confining interactivity to an isolated, pre-scripted part of the system (161). Murray further differentiates this form of agency from mere interactions with controllers or game pieces, claiming that agency is "an aesthetic pleasure ... an experience to be savored for its own sake" (162). According to Murray, then, the amount and type of actions available to the player (and the system's reaction to the player's choices) is not just a matter of creating a puzzle; it is a large part of how the video game medium expresses ideas and narratives. For her, games may "be read as texts that offer interpretations of experience," connected as much to affective reality as it is to technologically mediated systems (177). Some game adaptations – particularly those in which the player takes on

the role of the source text's protagonists – can be seen as providing interpretations of a particular character's experience within their world. One way of doing this is to provide the player with some semblance of the character's ability to take meaningful action within their storyworld. For a superhero, this may involve rules for performing superhuman feats; for an expert marksman, it might mean mechanics that make shooting feel easy and natural; and for a hobbit, it may mean being unable to do very much of anything except sneak around and maybe overcome the occasional goblin.

This causes a few issues for game adaptations. First, it is rarely compelling from a gameplay perspective to be severely limited in one's agency, even if a particular character is bumbling or unheroic. This tension between compelling stories (which are often about characters overcoming limitations to their agency) and compelling gameplay (which often involves being able to do exciting things) exists within any game designed with the gameplay aesthetic of "Narrative" in mind (see Hunicke, Leblanc, and Zubek 2). The issue with game adaptations and agency, however, is not necessarily that many compelling protagonists in other stories are less than action heroes, though this is sometimes the case. Instead, it has to do with the player's knowledge of the source text. As established in the last chapter, to treat an adaptation *as an adaptation* requires a particular level of familiarity with its source text: one must be able to make meaningful connections between the two works in order for it to operate via a loop of recognition. This level of knowledge does not coincide with the character's knowledge at all; whereas a protagonist has relatively high agency over their own stories and low knowledge of how they will end, a player with enough knowledge to treat a game adaptation *as a game adaptation* will have both a high level of agency over what the protagonist does and a high level of knowledge regarding how the story is "supposed" to play out. This causes a problem for game

adaptations, particularly when creators are faced with designing challenges or experiences that depend upon the player/protagonist *not* knowing what is going to happen.

This discrepancy between a player's knowledge of the source and their agency over the narrative is the practical parallel to the conflict between a riddle's dependence on a referent and its rule-bound process of guessing that referent in that it pits the intertextual requirements of adaptations against the need for compelling (and often repeatable) gameplay. As such, *The Hobbit's* iconic "Riddles in the Dark" sequence – dependent as it is on the enigmatic, guessable literary form of the riddle – serves as an illustrative case study in this regard. Nearly every commercially published *Hobbit* game has wrestled with this issue in some capacity, but this section will focus on four: Pressman Games' *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey Adventure Board Game* (2012), Sierra Entertainment's *The Hobbit* video game (2005), Ice Crown Enterprises' *The Hobbit Adventure Board Game* (1997), and Fantasy Flight Games' *The Hobbit Board Game* (2010). Each presents a unique approach to reconciling the player's knowledge of the source material and their agency over the narrative with the need for compelling gameplay. These will eventually be contrasted with a more in-depth reading of the game that began this chapter – Beam Software's 1982 text adventure version of *The Hobbit* – in order to highlight an approach to game adaptation that resonates with the Tolkien's use of the riddle as a structuring logic as discussed by Roberts. Although each of these games could support a full reading on their own, I leave that to task to other scholars in favor of focusing on the role of the riddle and how it illustrates some of the larger challenges of game adaptation.

Case Study 1: Pressman Games' *An Unexpected Journey Adventure Board Game*



Figure 15 – Bilbo, Gandalf, and Thorin on the board of Pressman's *An Unexpected Journey*

The first of the Hobbit adaptations I will be examining here, Pressman Games' *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey Adventure Board Game* (2012), probably best exemplifies the problem of high knowledge/high agency if left unaddressed. The game involves players taking on the roles of Bilbo or one of his dwarven companions as they make their way across a map of hexagonal tiles leading from Bilbo's home in The Shire to the Eagle Eyrie at the other end of the board (Figure 15). Along the way, players can use their characters' special abilities to overcome certain obstacles represented by "Event Cards" that are drawn whenever they land on spaces marked with corresponding symbols. Six of these cards – each entitled "Riddles in the Dark" and bearing an image of Gollum's expectant face – reproduce riddles from Tolkien's book and directs players to provide the correct answer from memory (Figure 16, below). Players who answer successfully (they can check their answers on a reference card set aside before gameplay) are given in-game currency that they can use to strengthen their characters. Players who fail to answer the riddle correctly, however, will lose a "Life Point" and have to return the card to the

bottom of the deck for another player to encounter. For players who are familiar enough with the source material to treat the game as an adaptation (and, presumably, interested enough to purchase and play a three-hour board game based on it), the answer to each riddle will almost certainly be obvious. As such, while this is technically “faithful” to the source material in that it reproduces each of Tolkien’s riddles word-for-word and requires a player to produce the canonical answer, the high likelihood that a player knows the riddle divorces it from the high-stakes conflict in the book and removes any challenge such an event may have.

As discussed earlier, as long as the riddle remains in a player’s memory, it will fail to operate as a proper riddle within the experience of gameplay. The difficulty for reinterpreting (and re-presenting) *The Hobbit*’s riddle contest in such a way that resonates with both the reader’s experience of the narrative and Bilbo’s experience of the riddle becomes retaining the experience of a high agency, low knowledge protagonist within the experience of a high knowledge, high agency player. In other words, designers must reconcile the danger of not knowing the answer with the pleasure of reliving a beloved scene.

Case Study 2: Sierra Entertainment’s *Hobbit*

One way designers have attempted to overcome the gameplay issues illustrated by Pressman Games’ *Hobbit* is by limiting player agency over the events of a given narrative, aligning the gameplay with the novel reader’s experience of low agency over and high

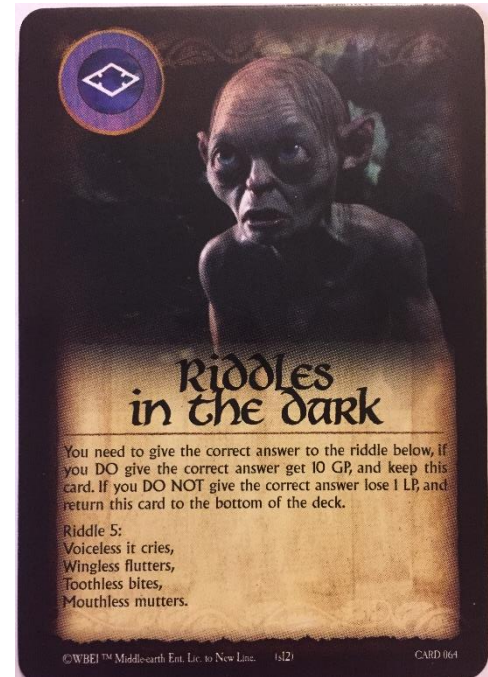


Figure 16 – “Riddles in the Dark” Encounter Card



Figure 17a – Approaching Gollum's cave (gameplay) Figure 17b – Finding the Ring (unrendered cutscene)

knowledge of the narrative. This strategy is particularly common in commercial video games such as the second game in this brief survey: Sierra Entertainment's console iteration of *The Hobbit* (2005). After navigating the "Goblin Caves" level in typical platforming style – jumping from rock to rock, solving puzzles involving explosive barrels and push-able boxes, slicing 3D rendered goblins with their faithful sword – the player eventually comes across Gollum's subterranean cavern (Figure 17a). Upon hopping up some platforms and approaching a golden ring shining in the darkness, the game switches to an unrendered (lower quality) cutscene involving Bilbo picking up the ring and exclaiming his surprise ("Hullo! What's this? A ring!") (Figure 17b). This serves as a transition into the score screen for the level, which is revealed to have been titled "Riddles in the Dark." The game then transitions into a series of four non-interactive cutscenes which depict a shortened version of the subsequent events of Tolkien's novel. The first cutscene remediates the presentation of a stylized storybook, evoking illustrated versions of Tolkien's story (Figure 18a). A wizened narrator paraphrases the rules of Gollum's riddle contest over cartoonish illustrations on sepia pages: "They agreed to play the ancient game of riddles. The rules were simple. If Gollum lost the game, he would show Bilbo the way out. But if Bilbo lost, Gollum would eat a tasty dinner. Soon, Bilbo couldn't think of any more



Figure 18a – The riddle contest (storybook cutscene) Figure 18b – Besting Gollum (pre-rendered cutscene)

riddles. . .” This immediately transitions into a pre-rendered (higher quality) cutscene which depicts Bilbo and Gollum acting out almost word-for-word the ending of this sequence as depicted in the book (Figure 18b). Players can only watch as Bilbo’s bumbling cheat (“What...What have I got in my pocket?”) causes Gollum to try and fail to answer the riddle, before bounding past the now invisible Bilbo and up the stairs. This cutscene fades into another storybook-style interlude of Bilbo meeting up with his companions outside of the cave and yet another pre-rendered cutscene of the party escaping from the Goblins on the back of giant eagles before the players are able to play again. The game essentially compresses three chapters of the book into four minutes of unplayable cutscenes, something that better reflects the form and experience of a film rather than a game. While this remediates the reader’s experience of the narrative by keeping the storyline intact, it does so at the expense of the player’s ability to engage with the world as Bilbo would.

Case Study 3: Ice Crown Enterprises’ *The Hobbit Adventure Board Game*

Another way to reconcile the high knowledge, high agency of game adaptations is to neutralize the effect a player’s knowledge can have in the events of the story, as Ice Crown

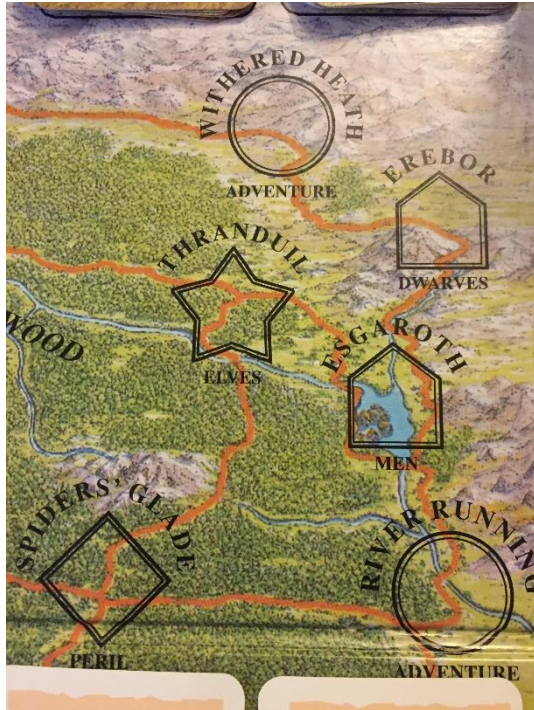


Figure 19 – I.C.E.'s Tolkienian Placenames

Enterprises (henceforth I.C.E.) does in *The Hobbit Adventure Boardgame* (1997). As opposed to the linear experience of getting through the novel as presented in Sierra's version of the tale, I.C.E.'s game deviates from the events of the source novel and makes the journey more abstract. Each player takes the role of a nameless hobbit, tasked with “gathering the experience, equipment, and information that will enable him to defeat (outwit) the Dragon” located on the Eastern edge of a map that is far more detailed and extensive than the one

described in Tolkien's *Hobbit*. In fact, many of the places that Bilbo and his company travel through in the book are retitled with names that only appear elsewhere in Tolkien's later legendarium – “The Lonely Mountain” becomes “Erebor,” the hall of the nameless “elf-king” is rechristened “Thranduil,” etc. – reflecting the “*Hobbit* as prelude to *The Lord of the Rings*” discourse as expressed in Tolkien's aborted revisions of the story (Figure 19). Along the way, players can potentially run into obstacles like goblins and wolves as their literary counterpart Bilbo did (represented by a deck of cards), but none of these encounters are guaranteed to occur in the course of a game. In fact, the entire goal of the game – gathering “talismans” of various colors from across Middle Earth in order to stand a chance against the dragon Smaug – is entirely without precedent in Tolkien's original novel. The game's rendition of the “Riddles in the Dark” sequence also reflects this loose relationship to Tolkien's plot. Instead of coming across Gollum themselves, players can collect “Riddle” cards to play against their rival hobbits

rather than fight them outright (Figure 20). Each card has a riddle from the book and up to three other answers printed in green boxes, each corresponding to a correct reply to Tolkien's riddles. As the game is aimed towards fans of Tolkien already – the place names and other details seem tailored specifically to those who have read not only *The Hobbit*, but *The Lord of the Rings* and perhaps the *Silmarillion* as well – players are not expected to simply answer the question on the card. Instead, players must counter



Figure 20 – Riddle contest in progress

their opponent's Riddle card by playing a Riddle card containing the correct answer. If the challenged player responds correctly, they may choose to end the contest or throw back a riddle of their own, and the contest goes on until one player is unable to play a correct response. In a move that harkens back to the first edition of *The Hobbit*, the loser of the contest must give up one of their hard-earned trinkets to the winner. Although the game's designers have neatly captured both the dynamics of Tolkien's riddle-contest and its outcome in a way that resonates with its depiction in the novel, it still abstracts the events into a matter of conserving resources (Riddle cards) rather than using one's wit.

Case Study 4: Knizia's *Hobbit*

A third way to reconcile the high agency, high knowledge of the player with the high agency, low knowledge experience of the protagonist is to give player control of a secondary



Figure 21 – Bag End and Battle with the Goblins in the first part of Fantasy Flight's game

character, allowing them to act within the world without greatly altering the protagonist's journey. This is the strategy employed by game designer Reiner Knizia in his take on *The Hobbit Board Game* (Fantasy Flight Games 2010). Instead of taking the role of Bilbo, this semi-cooperative game casts 2-5 players as dwarves in Bilbo's company traveling to reclaim their home at the Lonely Mountain. Unlike the freeform movement and various player characters of the board games described above, the players in Fantasy Flight's game are represented by a single hobbit-shaped pawn that moves one space at a time across a linear board punctuated by "Adventure" spaces that depict four major story beats in Tolkien's work: "Battle the Goblins," "Fight the Wargs," "Escape from the Mirkwood Elves," and "Kill Smaug the Dragon" (Figure 21). Each round, one player draws an "Event" card emblazoned with a *Hobbit* quote which either grants a boon based on a scenario from the book ("The Troll's Cache," "Elrond's Counsel," etc.) or directs the party to move the pawn forward one space per player. While players are unable to make decisions befitting of a protagonist such as where the party will go and what it will do, they

are afforded a chance to enrich themselves along the way. Each space on the board is stamped with a symbol representing one of the game's four resources (Initiative, Cunning, Strength, and Provisions), which increase the chances a player will earn victory points ("Treasure") by rolling dice at each



Figure 22 – Numbered "dwarf" cards and hobbit pawn

Adventure space. To determine the order in which these resources are distributed, players bid using numbered "Dwarf" cards (Figure 22): the winning bid receives the resources on the first space, the runner up gets the resources on the second, and so on. As opposed to the experience of an overwhelmed hobbit trying to survive a fantastic adventure, these bidding mechanics encourage players to see the plot of Tolkien's novel from the perspectives of the dwarves, united



Figure 23 – Character resource tracker and "Riddle in the Dark" cards

in their quest to reclaim their homeland but constantly bickering over treasure and glory. The event cards pertaining to "Riddles in the Dark" or "The Escape from Gollum" need not

recreate either of those events from Bilbo's perspective, and instead become chances for the dwarves to enrich themselves further (Figure 23). This game adaptation can thus have its proverbial cake and eat it too, allowing players to re-experience their favorite moments from the well-known source text while still allowing them to exercise some agency over an unknowable outcome from within the world. The board game is as such "true" to the text's plot and structure in this sense because it gives the players roles and goals that differ from the protagonist's, essentially sidestepping the conflict between a reader's knowledge of a text and the protagonist's agency over the plot by nullifying both.

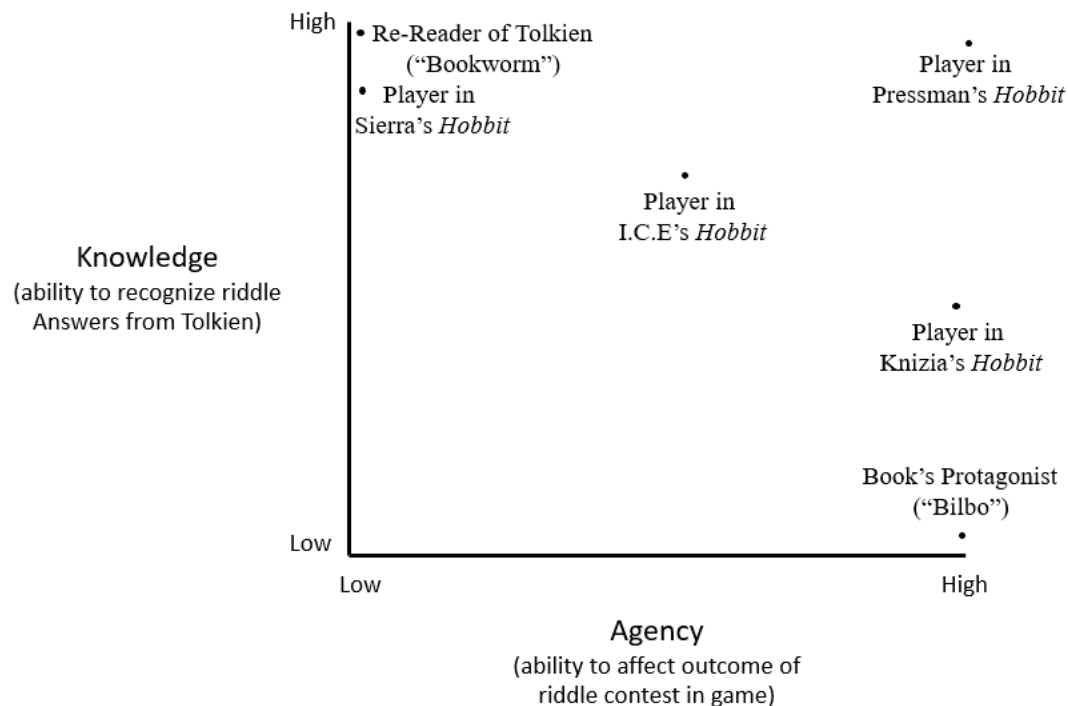


Figure 24 – Knowledge of Tolkien's riddles vs. agency over riddle contest's outcome in case studies

As the above short survey has shown, multiple *Hobbit* game adaptations have taken up the challenge of playfully marrying the player's knowledge of the source text with compelling gameplay, but none of the above have seemed to have fully embraced the enigmatic and potentially unstable form of the riddle as a structuring logic (Figure 24). Beam Software's text-

adventure game serves as an interesting counterpoint to these four examples in that it neither restricts the player's agency through cutscenes (as Sierra's *Hobbit* does) nor neutralizes their knowledge by deviating completely from the plot (as I.C.E.'s board game does). In addition, the particular affordances of the text adventure genre (to be discussed further below) allow for a system which neither abstracts the riddle contest into statistics (as Knizia's game does) nor necessarily presents the players with the same riddles from Tolkien's novel, thus depriving them of the chance to engage with a challenging riddle (as in Pressman Game's tabletop version of the story). Instead, Beam Software's *The Hobbit* leverages the player's potential knowledge of the source material within its design in order to create compelling gameplay that goes beyond following the script that the book sets out. In fact, it could be said to re-read the entirety of Tolkien's text through his riddle contest, aligning the player's core experience of finding creative solutions to time-sensitive puzzles with Bilbo's experience of struggling to answer the hungry Gollum's riddles. Understanding how Beam Software's *The Hobbit* accomplishes this requires a deeper examination of its relationship to the text adventure genre and its own unique mechanics operate.

The Riddling Resonances of the Text Adventure Genre

Just as Tolkien's act of re-writing *The Hobbit* was driven by a desire to integrate it with *The Lord of the Rings* at the expense of its light-hearted fairy-tale tone, Beam Software's approach to adapting *The Hobbit* was shaped by the desire to make a commercially successful video game. In fact, the project was not originally pitched as an adaptation at all. Beam Software's founders, book-publishers-turned-entrepreneurs Alfred Milgrom and Naomi Besen, had created the company as a subsidiary of Melbourne House Publishing in order to capitalize on

the growing interest in software and other digital publishing projects (“Hits of the 80s”).²¹ Inspired by the commercial success of text-adventure games like Infocom’s *Zork* series (1980-1982), Milgrom hired Australian computer science students Veronika Megler and (later) Phillip Mitchell with the explicit direction to “write the greatest adventure game ever” (Megler, “There and Back Again” 2). According to Megler, the hiring of students with a computer science background rather than hobbyists made Milgrom “a bit of a visionary” at the time (2), and he encouraged his employees’ growth as game developers by “[giving] us \$20 to go and play arcade games, sometimes as often as each week, to see what other folk were doing and what the state of the art was in that industry” (“There and Back Again” 8). The driving impetus of making a successful game, however, does not mean the book was an afterthought in the design process. Megler, whose “game-playing experience was very limited” (“There and Back Again” 2), was by contrast “very familiar with the book,” having “read it multiple times” and using that knowledge to (as will be discussed more below) “[go] through the book sequentially ... to figure out how to extract the map, [and] how to capture the characters” (“Interview”). Further, game scholar Helen Stuckey reports that in order to get the rights to use the book from the Tolkien Estate – a move probably meant to appeal to the same demographic as the fantasy-laden *Zork* while leveraging Milgrom’s experience as a book publisher – Beam Software agreed to package a physical copy of Tolkien’s novel with early copies of the game (Stuckey 100). Although it stemmed from a desire to make a playable product, then, Beam Software’s game was quite literally connected to Tolkien’s novel from the beginning.

Although it is unclear as to where the inspiration to use *The Hobbit* as a basis for the game came from (Stuckey 100), Tolkien’s novel resonates rather well with the conventions of the text adventure game genre.²² Deriving its title from Will Crowther and Don Woods’ 1975

Colossal Cave Adventure (sometimes called ‘ADVENT’ or simply *Adventure*) for the mainframe computer, the mechanics of the text adventure game genre lend themselves well to the gameplay aesthetics of “Challenge” (game as obstacle-course) and “Discovery” (game as uncharted territory). The genre’s core game loop involves a player navigating a virtual environment and solving puzzles by typing commands into a console. Players can travel between various locations (often called “rooms”) by typing in cardinal or vertical directions (“go north,” “south,” “go up,” “down,” “enter,” “exit,” etc.) and interact with any objects there using similarly limited language specified in a manual or “help” function (such as “use,” “open,” “get,” “say,” etc.). In lieu of a graphical representation of the virtual world, each location within a text adventure is rendered by a short description of the area and its contents, including any information regarding how one might exit, what collectable items (if any) are nearby, and what dangers they can expect to find there. Overcoming such dangers in a text adventure is not usually a matter of quick button presses or clever maneuvers but instead depends upon discovering the right commands and combination of in-game items that will allow you to safely pass by. An early puzzle in Crowther and Woods’ *Adventure*, for example, involves picking up a wicker cage in one room (by typing “get cage”), capturing a bird in another (“get bird”), and releasing the bird so it can kill a snake that blocks your path (“open cage”). While combat does occur in many text adventures, using a “kill” or “fight” command before understanding the situation is a risky process, both because it may result in death (such as trying to “fight” a poisonous snake) or prevent the player from progressing (as successfully “killing” the bird would). Perhaps more essential to completing the game than collecting items to overcome obstacles or subdue enemies is the task of creating a coherent map of the game’s maze-like chambers (either mentally or with pen and paper) in order to complete whatever goal is presented to the player. In the case of the earliest text adventures on

which *The Hobbit* was based, this usually involves collecting some sort of precious items and returning them safely to the place where the adventure started. Added to the fact that early text adventures like *Adventure* and *Zork* often already drew from fantasy tropes to populate their virtual worlds – having their players contend against dwarves, wizards, and dragons in a quest for treasure – these conventions make Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* seems like a perfect fit for the genre.

The text adventure game’s “there and back again” structure of a perilous journey into an unknown fantasy world in which obstacles are overcome by the clever use of found objects rather than martial prowess already parallels Bilbo’s experience of the novel, but there are resonances with the reader’s experience of the novel as well. The text-adventure genre’s use of verbal description over immersive graphical visuals remediates the form of the written text, leading many to describe the form in terms of “interactive fiction.” Even though Beam Software’s *Hobbit* deviates from this model slightly by including non-interactive graphical illustrations above the user interface in some rooms, these serve the same function as (and many indeed mirror) Tolkien’s own sketches in illustrated versions of *The Hobbit* (Figure 25).

The player’s constant reference to a hand-drawn map, too, parallels the act of a dedicated reader constantly flipping between the description of a new locale and the illustration of Thorin’s Map



Figure 25 – Bilbo's home in Beam Software's game (left) and Tolkien's own sketches (right)

at the beginning of Tolkien's novel in an attempt to track the party's progress. Stronger still is the connection between the frequent whimsical interjections of Tolkien's storybook narrator – who, after interrupting himself with the presumed question of “what is a hobbit?”, ends his tangent with a brusque “Now you have enough to go on with. As I was saying...” (30) – and the constant commentary of the text adventure genre's language parser, which can be queried for descriptions with a “look at” command and responds to the player's invalid commands with stock responses like “I don't know that word” or “You cannot do that.” Although the narrator in Beam Software's *The Hobbit* is not as metatextual as those in some other text adventures,²³ the disembodied presence of another narrative voice contributes to the illusion of a conversational context that is cultivated within the novel. The formal structure of the text adventure game thus affords a gameplay experience that has strong resonances with Bilbo's experience of the narrative as well as the reader's experience of Tolkien's novel – more so, I would argue, than the various *Hobbit* game adaptations discussed in the previous section.

But more than facilitate an experience that is akin to both Bilbo and Tolkien's figure of the bookworm, the genre of the text adventure also resonates with Tolkien's *The Hobbit* due to the relationship each has with the form of the riddle. Nick Montfort begins his book *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction* with a full chapter on the subject of the literary riddle, describing how it shares structural similarities with works of interactive fiction (including text adventure games like Beam Software's *The Hobbit*). He sketches four structural and contextual parallels between text adventure games and literary riddles, each of which finds parallels in this paper's previous discussions of riddles. First, riddles each create a “systematic world” in which “things relate to each other and are endowed with special abilities or attributes,” invoking the riddle's ironically descriptive, yet rule-bound relationship to a referent and the text

adventure game's sometimes strange but internally consistent list of commands and items (43). Montfort also claims riddles and text adventure games present themselves as "something to be explicitly solved" (45) and that each "requires challenge and appropriate difficulty" (47), echoing both Pagis's understanding of riddles and the properties of games more broadly. Finally, Montfort claims that each "join the literary and the puzzling" in their artistic presentation, whether through clever wordplay or compelling imagery (43). We might add to this, too, the presence of an absent riddler (the game developer) invoked through the language parser/narrator, framing the interfacing between a player and the machine as a contest of wits in and of itself. If, as Adams claims, "[Tolkien's] *The Hobbit* is a deeply riddling book" in that "Tolkien styles his story as a series of problems to be solved, or riddles to be unriddled" then the very structure of the text adventure goes a long way towards bringing that aspect to the foreground (5).

Beam Software's Take on Text Adventures and Tolkien

Of course, the interpretatively productive resonance between Beam Software's *The Hobbit* and its literary source is not merely inherited from the affordances of the text adventure genre: the interpretative depth of this connection comes from the developers' formal innovations and procedural approach to adaptation. Beam Software's *The Hobbit* has three major formal innovations when compared to other text adventure games: a robust language parsing system, an in-game clock, and a dynamic gameworld. First is its robust parsing system known as "English," which recognizes over five hundred words (resulting in about fifty discrete actions) and allows players to go beyond the classic two-word phrases of *Adventure* by using adverbs, prepositions, and conjunctions to specify their commands ("User's Guide" 6). This encourages players to be both more creative and more intentional when composing their commands: according to Helen

Stuckey's examination of the game, typing "ATTACK GOBLIN" does not produce the same result as "VICIOUSLY ATTACK GOBLIN WITH SWORD," just as "SAY TO GANDALF 'CAREFULLY THROW ROPE'" is more likely to succeed than "THROW ROPE" (Stuckey 103). Counteracting a player's desire to spend time composing long commands is the fact that, unlike many other text adventures, Beam Software's *The Hobbit* keeps track of time. If the user is idle for too long (the rate varies depending on the technology one is using to play the game, but is generally less than twenty seconds), the game will automatically input a "WAIT" command and cause all of the other entities to move or act according to their programming. Pondering over how to escape a hungry troll for too long, for example, could result in an untimely death for the player as the troll's "EAT BILBO" command is triggered. When combined, Inglish's robust vocabulary and the in-game clock lend themselves to a time pressure dynamic that is not unlike the one Bilbo feels in his riddle contest against Gollum.

The actions that entities take during each in-game "turn" (whether or not the player had the time to submit their intended command) are not completely random but are instead generated from a short list of behaviors unique to each entity. It is this property – and the dynamic gameworld that results from it – that mark the third and perhaps most important innovation that *The Hobbit* brought to the text adventure genre. Recalling her boredom with *Colossal Cave Adventure* after completing it once ("There and Back Again" 2), Megler decided to add more variation to the game by designing entities that acted on their own. In a 2015 interview with Luke C. Jackson, Megler explains that eventually:

The Hobbit – my adventure game – became a collection of characters who were each – I'm not sure I'd be so grand as to call it 'each living out their own lives', but each expressing their own character – and then those characters interacted in a particular way. ... I thought, 'If I wanted to represent the character of the Hobbit, or a troll, or Gandalf, what would that look like?' What set of behaviours would I create that would allow

somebody to look at a character and say, “Yep, that’s Gandalf and that’s what Gandalf does!” even if Gandalf is in a situation he’s never been before (“Interview”).

The result of this design is a relatively unpredictable, dynamic gameworld governed by the interactions of characters that behave vaguely like their literary counterparts. The gruff, gold-obsessed dwarf Thorin follows Bilbo, grumpily refuses his commands half of the time, and will occasionally “sit down and start singing about gold;” the wise wizard Gandalf moves about randomly, picking up and commenting upon seemingly random items or bringing them to Bilbo; and Gollum wanders through the dark, asks riddles of those who approach him, and attempts to kill those that do not answer. Rather than champion the player as the central narrative agent and lead them through the story of Tolkien’s novel (as most of the game adaptations that came later do), the game instead positions the player as one of many actors in a rather chaotic system.

In the eyes of a fidelity critic, this might be seen as a failed adaptation. Indeed, a hintbook published well after the game’s release claims that “Gandalf the wizard sadly lacks much of the wisdom of the character in the book” and summarizes Thorin as a pawn who follows Bilbo through the first half of the adventure, but “after this he becomes a nuisance and can be left behind” (Elkan 10). But when approached with a lusory attitude and seen through the lens of the riddle, Beam Software’s work becomes an intriguing interpretation of the novel through Bilbo’s eyes. While the story may seem to progress methodically and orderly from the perspective of the reader, for Bilbo Middle Earth looks much more like a trek across a dangerous world of powerful heroes and monsters acting according to incomprehensible rules and behaviors. Navigating this world and discovering its rules is as challenging for players as it is for Bilbo, even for those that attempt to make the journey more than once. Yet if we take the time to step back and read these behaviors, we begin to see inklings of Tolkien’s characters as Bilbo would see them. To a hobbit perfectly content with his hole in the ground, Thorin and his company do indeed seem

unaccommodating and obsessed with gold well before coming down with “dragon sickness” (Tolkien 327); to a reluctant adventurer who has no idea where they are going, the sudden comings and goings of Gandalf (he leaves the party suddenly three times during the journey) seem arbitrary and frustrating; and to a meager halfling who runs into Gollum, not even the rules of the riddle-game are certain. This dynamic system of interacting parts encourages us to see the source text as being merely another element in the system of meaning rather than a script that cannot be deviated from, and allows compelling gameplay to occur even (and perhaps especially) for those that have a high knowledge of the source material.

To illustrate what I mean by this, let us return to the iteration of the “Riddles in the Dark” sequence that began this chapter and examine how its structure interacts with the player’s knowledge of the source in a way that retains the challenge and discovery of the text adventure genre while encouraging a compelling interpretation of the source. Unlike in the book, Bilbo’s arrival in the Goblin Tunnels within Beam Software’s game is far from a certainty: players are free to avoid it entirely if they happen to stumble upon it at all. Of course, those who have enough knowledge of the source text to treat Beam’s *Hobbit* as an adaptation would have an extra incentive for seeking these caverns out: the promise of finding the One Ring. These players would also probably expect some encounter with Gollum and would be armed with the correct answers to any of his riddles should he give them. However, upon Gollum’s uttering of the Riddle of the Sphinx (“Which is the animal that has four legs in the morning, two at midday, and three in the evening?”), the player is faced with something they did not expect and has only a moment to react. Even if the player has heard this riddle before, they are still placed in the same position as Bilbo in that they have to compose an effective response to the creature’s query before the game automatically cycles through the next turn. To criticize the game for not

recognizing a clever player's attempt to ask Gollum a riddle in return is to miss the point: in playing the text adventure game, in coming up with intricate commands in order to overcome the dangers of an ironically-twisted version of a familiar world, the player was always already engaged in a game of riddles. In this way, Beam Software's *The Hobbit* essentially re-interprets the entirety of Tolkien's novel through the lens of the riddle contest, the high-stakes battle of wits between a hapless hero (the player) and a cold-blooded creature (the computer).

Whereas Beam Software's version of Gollum's riddle leverages the player's knowledge of the source text to create an experience that resonates with Bilbo's, contemplating their options in the context of the text adventure game has the potential to be even more interpretatively productive. As it is for Bilbo, the player's encounter with Gollum occurs at one of the most stressful moments of the game. Any player familiar with text adventure games might (falsely) recognize the Goblin Tunnels as a prototypical maze in the style of those in *Colossal Cave Adventure*: a collection of linked rooms with nearly identical (if not completely identical) descriptions that need to be carefully mapped in order to successfully navigate.²⁴ With the added pressure of patrolling goblins that are likely to either throw Bilbo back in a cell at the beginning of the maze or kill him outright, this becomes so stressful that Helen Stuckey argues "many players in the 1980s struggled to go on, abandoning the game at this point" (Stuckey 102).²⁵ Those experienced players who do continue may recall a common strategy for such mazes: dropping items (or slaying foes) in each room and using them as landmarks to complete a map (Montfort 91). In lieu of many items to drop, and not willing to risk their progress on the chance that the game will accept their answer to a possibly unfamiliar riddle, the option to simply type "VICIOUSLY KILL GOLLUM" might be the easiest answer.²⁶ Taking such an option works

surprisingly well, removing one more obstacle from the player's path and allowing them to successfully continue the game with no mechanical repercussions.

The ease with which players may slay Gollum sheds more light on the thematically important conclusion of Tolkien's "Riddles in the Dark" sequence. After the riddle contest goes awry, the literary Bilbo slips the ring onto his finger (becoming invisible) and follows the now-howling Gollum through the tunnels to the exit. He then finds his only way out barred by the malicious creature, who threatens to sniff him out at any moment:

Bilbo almost stopped breathing, and went stiff himself. He was desperate. He must get away, out of this horrible darkness, while he had any strength left. He must fight. He must stab the foul thing, put its eyes out, kill it. It meant to kill him. No, not a fair fight. He was invisible now. Gollum had no sword. Gollum had not actually threatened to kill him, to tried to yet. And he was miserable, alone, lost. A sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror, welled up in Bilbo's heart: a glimpse of endless unmarked days without light or hope of betterment, hard stone, cold fish, sneaking and whispering. All these thoughts passed in the flash of a second. He trembled. And then quite suddenly in another flash, as if lifted by a new strength and resolve, he leapt (Tolkien 133).

In the context of this passage, the game mechanics allowing a player to so easily kill Gollum gain a whole new meaning. It would have been just as easy for Bilbo – armed, invisible, and desperate for escape – to kill the creature as it would be for the player, but Bilbo chooses not to. Instead, he chooses to avoid the creature, putting himself at risk as "Gollum threw himself backwards, and grabbed as the hobbit flew over him (133). The danger of this choice, too, is embodied in game mechanics, as leaving the room in which Gollum stands can result in the creature strangling Bilbo from behind and instantly killing him. Though Tolkien's Bilbo is tempted to look at Gollum as a monster to be slain or an obstacle to be overcome (and he certainly has reason to, given the context), Bilbo's flash of recognition imbues Gollum's existence with new, pitiable meaning. It is fitting, then, that Beam Software's Gollum – literally programmed as an unfeeling, murderous entity – should be so easily slain by players without an

interest in the character for which it stands. When read against Tolkien, this makes Bilbo's act of mercy seem all the more remarkable and perhaps adds a modicum of pity to the computerized Gollum's aimless wandering and apparent simple-mindedness. Perhaps, like Bilbo, players might be struck by "a sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror" upon seeing the digital Gollum aping the actions of the character on which it is based and change their actions accordingly (133).

To be clear, I am not attempting to claim that the programmers of Beam Software's *The Hobbit* intended for their game mechanics to be expressive of this moment in Tolkien's novel, nor am I insisting all players who come across Gollum in the game will (or ought to) be struck with pity for his plight or connect it with this specific passage. What I am arguing is that the interactions between the game's mechanics and the themes of its source text can facilitate such an interpretation, thereby encouraging players to rethink their interpretations and experiences of Beam Software's game, Tolkien's novel, and their own understanding of what makes *The Hobbit* compelling in all of its forms. Rather than acting as a hypothetical fidelity critic decrying an adaptation's "unfaithfulness" or a petulant riddlee who criticizes a riddle for being intentionally misleading, I suggest that those approaching game adaptations would do well to adopt a lusory attitude towards their object of study, accepting the connection between a text and a source just because it makes possible the activity of interpretation. By seeing adaptations like these as being systems which ironically describe rather than mimetically represent their sources and paying attention to how these systems operate, we might open up new and productive interpretations of the source text without requiring them to re-create a strictly "faithful" version of the text.

Conclusion: Riddles as Systems and Gollum's Choice

As the above discussion has shown, seemingly unfaithful game adaptations like Beam Software's *The Hobbit* are not riddled *with* apparent infidelities, but riddled *by* apparent infidelities: underneath the apparent disjunctions between the events represented in Tolkien's work and Beam Software's game lies a resonant network of literary conventions and gameplay mechanics that mutually inform and reinforce both each other and the respective experiences of characters and players. Using the systems approach, one could say that by engaging with these systems of narrative and ludic structures – attempting to “unriddle” the connections between the adaptation and its source through interpretation and play – the user is experiencing the game adaptation itself as a system made up of not only the adaptation and its source(s), but a range of virtual narrative and interpretative possibilities that have not yet come to pass. This same process is at work in non-game adaptations and (in the case of Tolkien) even in a writer's own revising process. When read as part of an intertextual system from which meaning arises, even the most dissonant of these versions can make us productively reassess our understanding of the source text and how we experience it. For Roberts, this means embracing the differences as opportunities to deepen or alter one's interpretations of the source rather than dismissing them outright in the name of (as he puts it) “some notional procrustean ‘coherence,’” echoing this chapter's embrace of a riddlee's lusory attitude over the strict dualism of fidelity (99).

This should not be taken to mean that one has to agree with every version's interpretation of a text; Roberts' major problem with Tolkien's attempted overhaul of *The Hobbit* (“The Quest of Erebor”) was its shift in perspective from an unknowing, haphazard hobbit for which nothing is certain to the wise, well-informed Gandalf for which the entire journey was part of a plan to fight the evil forces that would arise in *The Lord of the Rings*. Though Roberts is still “happy

there are two versions of *The Hobbit*” (99), he claims that reading the unpublished version in relation to the version we know today made him realize that

[i]n the first version of the story it does not really matter why Gandalf chooses a hobbit, of all people; more precisely, his whylessness of choice is actually the point of the story. . . . This is because the novel is not about Gandalf’s whys, it is about Bilbo’s adventure. Why he is chosen matters less than the way he acquits himself on his journey, and the extent to which he sheds his unheroism to become a better fellow. That is what matters because we are he. That is how the reading experience goes” (97).

We are, of course, free to disagree with the idea that “that is how the reading experience goes” – those engaging with *The Hobbit* as a prelude to *The Lord of the Rings* may certainly have a different experience with this version – but this reading does resonate with the experience of *The Hobbit* invoked by Beam Software’s game adaptation. Playing through *The Hobbit* creates an experience of the text that is not about the “why’s” – why there are inconsistencies, why this story matters to Tolkien’s larger storyworld, why it needs to be logically consistent – but about the journey itself. The value of an adaptation lies not in finding some “solution” to the riddle of fidelity, but in the interpretative experience of searching for it, of cycling through possible referents and exploring the system of intertextual connections that give a work its meaning.

But what are we to make of the fact that the riddle that ends Tolkien’s riddle contest – “What have I got in my pocket?” (Tolkien 125) – is not actually a riddle at all? One could attribute this to a failing of Bilbo’s lusory attitude in that he is no longer accepting the unwritten rules of the riddle contest and thus cheating to end it prematurely. Tolkien says as much, writing “the last question had not been a genuine riddle according to the ancient laws” (127). What is more interesting than Bilbo’s “cheat,” however, is Gollum’s reaction to it. After initially complaining about its unfairness (“It isn’t fair, my precious, is it, to ask us what it’s got in its nasty little pocketsees?” [126]), the creature then resolves to guess anyway. In treating this statement as a riddle Gollum is in fact displaying an *excess* of Suits’ lusory attitude, allowing the

activity to continue. Granted, neither Gollum nor Bilbo could be said to be playing along “just because it makes possible such an activity” (the stakes are too high for that, especially in Tolkien’s first edition where Gollum is risking his precious Ring), but this attitude is rather instructive. In recognizing an “unfaithful” riddle but continuing to interpret it anyway, Gollum is acting both like Beam Software’s game system – accepting unorthodox strategies so long as it recognizes the input in order to keep the game going – and somewhat like an adaptation scholar. Both understand that the recognition of dissonant elements within a system should not cause the process that system enables to come to a halt; rather, since meaning arises from the interactions between these elements, such dissonance can actually make the system more interpretatively productive.

This is true even for the unstable form of the riddle, which does not cease to be meaningful even after the solution is discovered. In their introduction to *Untying the Knot: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes*, Galit Hasan-Rokem and David Shulman claim that the true value of riddles (even those with one solution) lies in the “existential content” that arises from a user’s engagement with them (3). For Hasan-Rokem and Shulman, as for other scholars of the riddle, the process of untangling a riddle from its answer “is inherently enigmatic and also transformative: the transition effected leaves reality changed, restructured, its basic categories restated, recognized, affirmed” (3). The process of deciphering even a simple riddle like “What has golden hair and stands in the corner?” is to have one’s world changed:

The riddle is not just a statement about the world; it also produces change within the world. This change may have much to do with the composition of the riddlee’s self in relation to the challenge—categorical, social, and/or metaphysical— with which he is presented. Not only do brooms become princesses, and then revert to being brooms, but the self that confronts this process is also forced to view itself from the vantage point of an interacting other.... Categorical displacement or conflation always produces inner movement, with elements of doubt and, often, a drive toward self-delusion and the desperate restoration of the recognized order (5).

If the process of engaging with a riddle is making connections between the features of a text and a possible referent, in other words, these connections do not disappear when the riddle is solved. Instead, the connections forged by the riddlee can alter their understanding of what the referent is, how it operates, and what meaning it generates within the world. Tolkien's riddles mentioned above encourage us to think of how teeth are like stamping horses or the wind is a living, biting, crying creature, just as Hasan-Rokem and Shulman's riddle invites us to think of a household object as being imbued with magic. This sort of perceptual transformation can be (and has been) attributed to metaphor and figurative language more generally: poets have long argued that this "secret alchemy" (as Percy Bysshe Shelley once put it) is key to the social and moral value of their craft (Shelley 611).²⁷ Riddles (like games) only differ in the degree to which they explicitly structure the user's active role in this transformative process, how they force riddlees to view themselves "from the vantage point of an interacting other" (Hasan-Rokem and Shulman 5). Even if the riddlee eventually reverts to their habitual understanding and experience of the riddle's referent – a "restoration of the recognized order" that treats teeth as teeth, wind as wind, and a broom as a broom – the "inner movement" of comparing the riddle's mysterious clues to the nature of the mundane referent is a compelling aesthetic experience in and of itself, and sometimes those "elements of doubt" can even change one's relationship to a referent and thus their relationship to the world (5).

This process of defamiliarization, of engaging with (and actually helping to bring about) a dynamic system of meaning that leaves one's knowledge of the original subject forever changed, is exactly the type of process a systems approach to game adaptations aims to reveal. Through a systems approach we might see that riddles, like games, are systems that are meant to be played and worked through: their meaning is not necessarily contained in the content of any

individual descriptive element, but emerges from the interactions between these often conflicting descriptions and the user's own knowledge. Solving a riddle does not necessarily put an end to its meaning, just as successfully completing a text adventure game does not invalidate the way that gameplay has affected the player. Similarly, a systems approach reveals that riddles, like adaptations, are defined by their relationship to a particular referent: the experience of a riddle is driven by the recognition (or re-cognition) of the riddle in the referent and the referent in the riddle. Even after the riddle is solved and no longer "playable," the relationship to the referent and the meaning it engenders still remains. As Pagis puts it, "a different reward awaits the interpreter after the riddle is solved, when the double paradox ceases to be an encoding device and reveals itself as a profound metaphor" (98). This is not to say that riddles are the original game adaptations or that all game adaptations ought to be viewed as riddles. Instead, I am arguing that due to their formal and operational similarities to both games and adaptations, riddles serve as a second structuring metaphor, a useful entry point into understanding how game adaptations operate within the systems approach put forth in this project, especially in regard to a how a user's expectations and knowledge impact their experience of playing through (and with) a well-known source.

Of course, while riddle-like text adventure games such as Beam Software's *Hobbit* allow for a great deal of creativity in coming up with unorthodox solutions to problems, they are far from the most open-ended of game genres. Those seeking to "play" with a well-known source text might be better suited to a more robust system, one that presents an even wider possibility space than that facilitated by the computing technology of the early 80s. The next chapter contends that to find this type of system requires not a step into the future, but a step away from the screen. Tabletop roleplaying games – a genre in which text adventures are firmly rooted –

were already achieving the kind of dynamic character modelling and rules-based world-building that marked Beam Software's *Hobbit* as innovative, and they have only become more ambitious in the 21st century. As the next chapter will show, studying the ways in which such pen-and-paper roleplaying games turn popular characters and fictional worlds into playable systems can tell us a great deal about how adaptation works, especially when that source material in question is more about decorum than dungeons or dragons.

Chapter 3:

Abstracting Austen: Playing with the Possible in *Good Society*: A Jane Austen RPG

When the tea-things were removed, and the card-tables placed, the ladies all rose, and Elizabeth was then hoping to be soon joined by him, when all her views were overthrown by seeing him fall a victim to her mother's rapacity for whist players. . . They were confined for the evening at different tables, and she had nothing to hope, but that his eyes were so often turned towards her side of the room, as to make him play as unsuccessfully as herself.

-Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (237-238)

Jane Austen's 1813 novel *Pride and Prejudice* can be read as a tale of revision. The protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, spends much of the novel forming and reforming a conception of the eligible bachelor Mr. Darcy. Her initial meeting with the gentleman – who is described as having a “fine, tall person, handsome features, [and] noble mien” in addition to his “ten thousand pounds a year” (6) – leaves her with a negative impression after she overhears him call her “tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt *me*” (7). Despite numerous instances of witty banter and romantic chemistry between the two, Elizabeth's dislike for Mr. Darcy only increases when she is told that he has engineered the disinheritance of a certain Mr. Wickham and had convinced his friend and eligible bachelor Mr. Bingley to reject her sister Jane's advances. When Mr. Darcy suddenly proposes (and seemingly expects her consent despite all of these actions), the shocked Elizabeth considers him to be arrogant, conceited, and selfishly disdainful of the feelings of others (131). It is only after telling him so that she begins to discover there is more to the story: Darcy only separated Bingley and Jane because he thought Jane cared little for his best friend, and Wickham turns out to be a scoundrel who absconds with Elizabeth's younger sister Lydia. It is only after finding out that Darcy secretly forced Wickham to marry Lydia and thus saved her family from scandal that Elizabeth's understanding of Darcy changes: Mr. Darcy is not

an aloof, selfish man who denies others of their happiness, but a noble one who is capable of great deeds provided he can overcome his pride.

While Elizabeth eventually comes to understand her lover within the context of Austen's book, the question of who Mr. Darcy *really* is becomes much more complicated in the contemporary landscape of Austen adaptations. In the eponymous screen adaptations of the novel by the BBC (1995) and Working Title Films (2005), Mr. Darcy happens to look a great deal like Colin Firth or Matthew Macfadyen (respectively), and apparently has a penchant for spontaneous swims or morning mist-bound strolls in his rather revealing undershirt (neither of which explicitly occur in Austen's novel). Adaptations that retell Austen's story in a different time period attribute Mr. Darcy's wealth and influence to a variety of professions, including being the heir to a successful technology company called "Pemberley Digital" (the Darcy of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, 2012) or working as a human-rights barrister (the Darcy of Helen Fielding's 1996 novel *Bridget Jones's Diary*, who is played once again by Colin Firth in its 2001 film adaptation). Mr. Darcy's identity only gets more muddled from there: Linda Berdoll adds that Mr. Darcy is an extremely passionate lover in her boddice-ripping romance novel *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife* (2004), Seth Graham-Smith describes the gentleman's impressive martial arts training and zombie-slaying prowess in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), and multiple sources have revealed Mr. Darcy as having a taste for human blood, including Amanda Grange's *Mr. Darcy, Vampyre* (2009) and Colette L. Saucier's *Pulse and Prejudice* (2012). Mr. Darcy, it seems, is a man capable of being (and doing) many things.

Despite the fact that many of these identities are not necessarily mutually exclusive, there are reasons one would not initially answer the query "Who is Mr. Darcy?" with "a tall, aloof, sexy, blood-sucking zombie hunter/lawyer/tech mogul who wears flimsy undershirts and

happens to look a great deal like a particular movie star.” The most straightforward yet ultimately limiting explanation for this is simply that Austen never described most of these things in the novel where he first appeared, so any depictions of a character with differing traits – one who is not rich, aloof, and from the Regency era – cannot be the “true” Darcy. As the previous chapters’ discussions of fidelity criticism have shown, however, the matter is rarely (if ever) that simple. Adaptation studies scholars have long argued that adaptations of canonical texts are typically in conversation with other adaptations as much as they are reinterpreting a single source.²⁸ Those who adapt Austen’s Darcy do so in the context of other iterations of the character, frequently making their own additions and alterations or reinscribing traits and actions that were first introduced in other adaptations rather than the book (such as the prominent riding boots and noncanonical swim of the BBC’s Darcy, which reappear in later adaptations).²⁹ This authority need not be limited to producers either: each individual audience member’s conception of Darcy is theoretically distinct as each individual constructs their version of Darcy based on which versions of the character they are familiar with as well as their own personal preferences, identities, and contexts of reception. This is not to say any argument about a literary character like Darcy is thus invalid because potentially everyone has their own unique vision of the character; on the contrary, some “Darcyisms” are demonstrably more common across multiple iterations of the character than others and comparing such readings can be interpretatively productive in and of itself. Instead, the multiplicity of Darcys reminds us that the relationship between a character and the text in which they first appear is rarely a straightforward one.

An alternative (and far more interpretatively interesting) reason that one would not string together the traits of all possible Darcys when describing the character is that they are not meant to be static traits at all, but latent capabilities only manifested in certain contexts. Austen’s own

version of the character, after all, seems little more than an arrogant socialite until his pretensions are rebuffed by Elizabeth and he has the opportunity to reform. In fact, he says as much towards the very end of the novel:

I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle. As a child I was taught what was *right*, but was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit. . . . Such as I was, from eight to eight and twenty; and such I might still have been but for you, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth! (Austen 248-249).

Though he inherited “good principles” from his parents, those virtues did not manifest as such before his ordeal with Elizabeth, and Darcy sees himself as very much still capable of selfishness in a world without her. Just as Darcy is able to glean insight into his own character by reflecting on his relationship to Elizabeth and speculating what he “might still have been” without her, so too can the iterations of the character in other adaptations open up new understandings of who Darcy “may still be” to us. The Darcy of Austen’s novel never has an awkward wet-shirted encounter with Elizabeth, for example, but how would the stuffy gentleman react if he had? Austen’s Darcy is not a renowned zombie hunter, but how would a man of his temperament and resources handle an undead outbreak? How might we extrapolate Darcy and Elizabeth’s courtship into the ups and downs of married life as captured in the book’s unofficial sequels, and how might such an exploration change our understanding of other instances of these characters across media? Seeing Darcy this way – not as a static character with a single set of traits but as a mutable element that operates differently within various dynamic narrative systems – leads to all sorts of questions about what the character (and, in turn, the book itself) is capable of.

As this chapter will show, game adaptations are uniquely suited to this sort of exploration of narrative possibilities due in part to the way they explicitly *abstract* rather than *adapt* their sources: that is, they create systems of rules which model how characters, settings, and plot

points *could* interact within literary worlds without dictating a particular sequence of events for players to follow. We have already seen this concept at work in the previous chapter's discussion of Beam Software's *The Hobbit* (1982), which contains digital automata of Tolkien's characters that independently follow simple scripts (Gollum asks riddles, Gandalf wanders off, etc.) that result in unpredictable and often strange scenarios that do not occur in Tolkien's books. But whereas the last chapter focused on how these abstractions of literary characters can be used to bridge the gulf between a player's agency and their knowledge of a single source text, this chapter will use Austenian game adaptations to explore the transformative potential of abstraction as it relates to the creation and reception of game adaptations and the larger intertextual systems from which they draw their meaning. While this chapter will argue that the concept of abstraction acts as an often-ignored first step in all kinds of intertextual processes – from adaptation to genre formation to the writing of fan fiction – the nature of game adaptations as expressive systems from which meaning arises allows them to make explicit the act of modeling literary characters and worlds in terms of operative traits and behaviors. In addition to explaining how the concept of abstraction operates within the systems approach to game adaptations explored in this project, this chapter will argue that Jane Austen's oeuvre serves as an apt case study for the exploration of abstraction not just because of its history of playful fan engagement (practices which some Austenian games simultaneously participate in and emulate for its players), but because of Austen's own relationship to strategic thinking, narrative design, and the conceptual dyad of the possible versus the merely probable.

This chapter is organized into two major sections. The first section serves as an explanation of abstraction, using both game design discourse and the many intertextual iterations of characters from Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to illustrate how the concept works within the

context of the systems approach to adaptation. This section will go on to show how the notion of abstraction can also be used to differentiate and track the various intertexts that influence a particular text's depiction of a literary world or character, a feature that is especially useful when distinguishing between games that meaningfully engage with a source text and those that graft its surface elements onto a pre-existing generic form. With the knowledge of abstraction in hand, the second section constitutes a deeper dive into the design of a particular Austenian adaptation – *Good Society: A Jane Austen Roleplaying Game* (Storybrewers 2018) – which seeks to answer not just how it abstracts Austen, but what this abstraction can tell us about Austen as a strategic thinker, a pursuer of possibilities, and a narrative designer in her own right. Drawing on a brief history of tabletop roleplaying games (a genre of which *Good Society* is a part), I will first argue that the very mechanics that set *Good Society* apart from similar games in the genre actually reframe Austen's narrative designs as being related rather than opposed to phallogocentric notions of strategic thinking, a method for looking at the world that game theorist Micheal Chwe has argued is core to Jane Austen's textual project. Further, I will use Mike Goode's reading of Austen and his notion of "capabilities" to show how *Good Society* facilitates an experience of Austen that not only mirrors fan engagement with Austen's work, but also encourages us to think of her as a narrative designer whose work affords the sort of reconfigurative play that lies at the heart of game adaptations like *Good Society*. Finally, I will argue that the game's emphasis on collaborative storytelling and unique conflict-resolution mechanics resonate with William Galperin's conception of Austen as exploring the possible within the restrictive probable, a deliberate approach to realism that sets her apart from many of her historical contemporaries. Examining the game's unique approach to abstracting Austen in this way can thus tell us not only about the ways Austen's works might operate during and after their original composition,

but also how characters, objects, and worlds are condensed and re-instantiated in adapted texts of all kinds, from unofficial sequels to big-screen parodies to entire genres that spin-off of a single work. Doing so will help illuminate the usefulness of a systems approach to adaptation as well as fill in one of the conceptual gaps in the project thus far: the relationship between an adaptation's actual source(s) and the user's abstracted conception of it.

Explaining Abstraction

The notion of abstraction as I use it here may be defined as the process and product of modelling people, places, items, and relationships (real or fictional) in terms of distinct traits and behaviors so that they will operate meaningfully within another system. Abstraction in this sense is derived largely from the field of computer science – specifically as it occurs in the class-based, object-oriented coding languages that are integral to modern game design – but similar modular paradigms for understanding how game elements interact are common across more general game design literature as well.³⁰ To abstract something is to model it in such a way that is relevant to a given context; the 1's and 0's of binary code are abstractions of the electrical pulses on which computers operate, just as a map is an abstraction of an actual landscape. Certain programming languages – especially those that drive modern digital game development like C#, Python, and Javascript – are organized in terms of abstractions called *objects*, which are collections of data and behaviors meant to model an entity in the program. Objects contain both *properties* (discrete pieces of data defining the object's state) and *methods* (pre-defined processes associated with the object) which allow it to change and be changed by other objects as the program runs.³¹ Just about everything in a gameworld coded using this paradigm – every enemy, collectable item, moving platform, even the virtual camera – may be considered an object, each with its own

properties and methods that dictate how it interacts with the rest of the game system. Crucially, while the properties and methods of an object might result in predictable behaviors on the individual scale, they do not necessarily determine the ultimate outcome of a complex program, especially when user input is involved.

To return to the subject of this chapter, how would one go about abstracting Mr. Darcy into an object according to this paradigm? Or, put differently, what would an abstraction of Mr. Darcy look like? As mentioned above, this depends a great deal on who is doing the abstracting and which versions of Darcy they are familiar with: an abstraction of Darcy based solely on Austen's novel may look quite different from one based solely on the zombie-slaying Darcy of Seth Graham-Smith's horror-parody. For the sake of argument, let us consider an abstraction drawn from both Austen's book and the roughly half-dozen adaptations discussed above. Based on this premise, we might look at the various Darcys and first come up with a list of properties that are meaningful and consistent in each of his iterations, such as "wealth," "attractiveness," and "pride." It is important to note that although these properties are relevant to how each iteration of Mr. Darcy functions in the various narrative systems of which he is a part, the actual values of these properties might change to better fit the narrative system of a particular adaptation. The "wealth" property, for example, may be expressed as the value "10,000 pounds per year" in Austen's novel and some period appropriate adaptations, but is expressed as "human rights barrister salary" or "tech company CEO" in modern iterations like *Bridget Jones' Diary* and *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* respectively; what is important in these adaptations is his wealth and status, not necessarily where it comes from.

Similarly, many of this abstract Darcy's methods (actions we expect him to take) may not be expressed at all in some systems, but they nevertheless may remain latent in one's personal

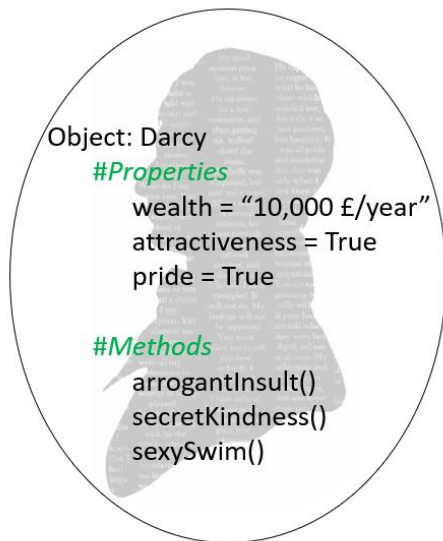


Figure 26 – Mr. Darcy abstracted into an object with properties and methods

construction of the character (Figure 26). These might include “arrogantInsult()” and “secretKindness()”, but also “sexySwim(),” which explicitly occurs in the BBC’s 1995 adaptation but would not seem out of place in either Hollywood’s 2005 rendition of the tale (which features a similar wet-shirted encounter) or Linda Berdoll’s steamy romance novel (which includes far more scandalous acts). The empty parentheses adjoining

each of these methods is borrowed pseudo-code notation, used to indicate the parameters under which

the method will “run” or the object upon which the method is enacted. In terms of the model of abstraction discussed here, these parentheses serve as a reminder that these methods may have multiple valid inputs even as they are bound by certain conditions. In Guy Andrews’s 2008 miniseries *Lost in Austen*, for example, protagonist Amanda Price stumbles into the world of *Pride and Prejudice* and quickly finds herself as the input for and enabler of the literary Darcy’s actions. Whereas the Darcy of Austen’s novel directs his initial ire and eventual admiration towards Elizabeth (which we might write as “arrogantInsult(Elizabeth)” or “secretKindness(Elizabeth)” to note which “object” he is acting upon), Amanda’s role as an available, witty, and strong-willed woman eventually attracts these same attentions (“arrogantInsult(Amanda)”, “secretKindness(Amanda)”). Further, in a playful nod to the 1995 series, the Darcy of *Lost in Austen* happily obliges to Amanda’s request that he strip down to his undershirt and dive into a nearby fountain, implying that the “sexySwim()” method merely requires the right opportunity to be expressed.

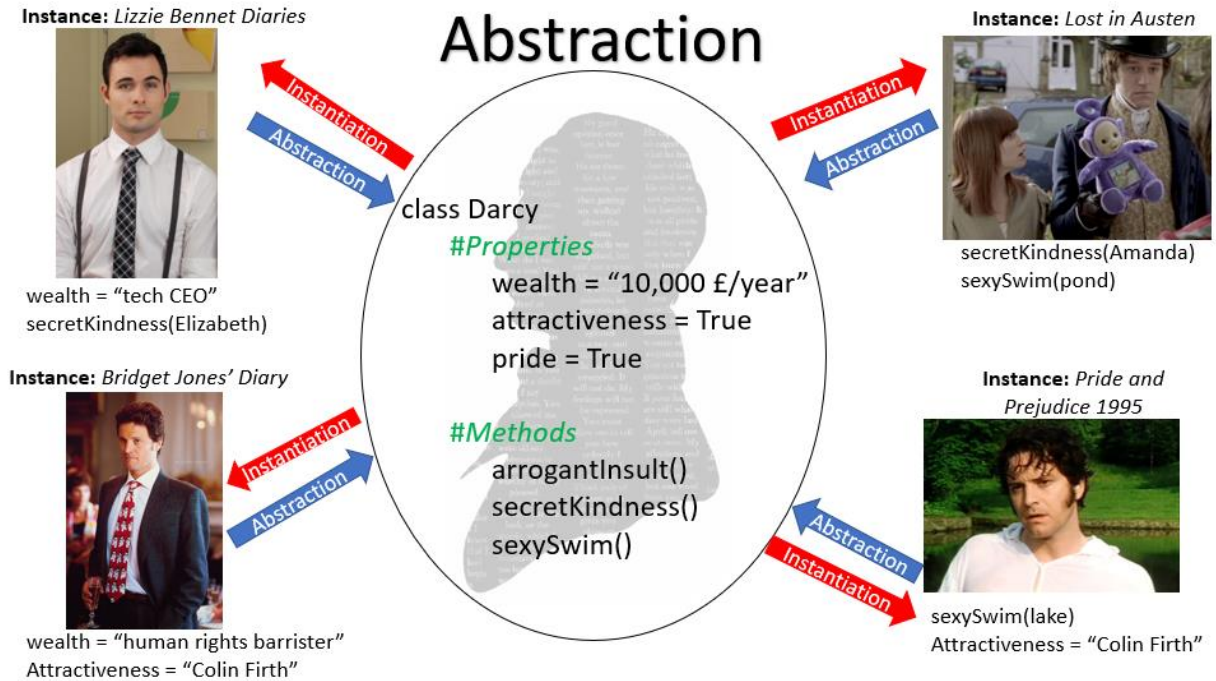


Figure 27 – A hypothetical "Darcy" class abstracted from multiple instances of the character

Aside from properties and methods, this object-oriented methodology presents two other computer science concepts which will prove useful to the study of adaptations within a systems framework: class and inheritance (Figure 27). Rather than code every object individually, computer scientists define these objects using abstract templates called *classes*. A class operates as a blueprint for an object, defining and initializing all of the properties and methods that allow it to work within the system. The objects that interact within the game system are therefore actually individual *instances* of these abstract classes, created (or "instantiated") by the operating system as the system runs. While these instances inherit all of the properties and methods from their class, each instance of an object can operate independently of each other as the program runs. According to this paradigm, properties and methods described above are actually defining a Darcy class rather than a single Darcy object, a blueprint upon which all other instances of Darcy are based. Each of these instances – including the Darcy of Austen's book, the Darcy of its screen adaptations, and even the Darcy of its parodies and fan fiction – may be conceived of as

inheriting the properties and methods of the Darcy class, but acting in different ways based upon the nature of the systems in which they are operating. Each instance of Darcy becomes both recognizable and distinct, independent and connected, predictable on the micro scale but able to exhibit new behaviors that can change our understanding of both the class and the larger textual system of which it is a part.

Using a technological and hierarchical concept like abstraction to describe the creative act of making or engaging with adaptations should thus not be taken as an endorsement of an immutable hierarchy of elements, nor should it be read as something ontologically distinct from “adaptation proper.” As abstractions are built from observations of the entity (or entities) being abstracted, they are necessarily idiosyncratic, incomplete, and sometimes inconsistent with each individual instance of the actual object. In addition, while not all adapters or audience members may be able to (or even need to) articulate a clear list of properties and methods a character or other abstracted element *must* have, conceiving of an intermediary mental construct in these terms can help explain how one continually navigates the difference between expectation and reality when confronting or creating adaptations. After all, few people sit in front of a screen adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* with Austen’s book open in front of them. The point of comparison is not necessarily *Austen’s* Darcy, but *their* Darcy: an amalgam of properties and methods abstracted from their many encounters with the character and their own evaluation of who he is and how he is likely to act, even when placed in a radically different narrative context from the one Austen places him in (see Figure 28 below).³² This personal abstraction of Darcy is (of course) subject to change with each new interpretation the user comes across, and will not always express every single one of its traits or behaviors in every context in which they appear. Even still, having such a model is a pre-requisite to recognizing his role within a given context

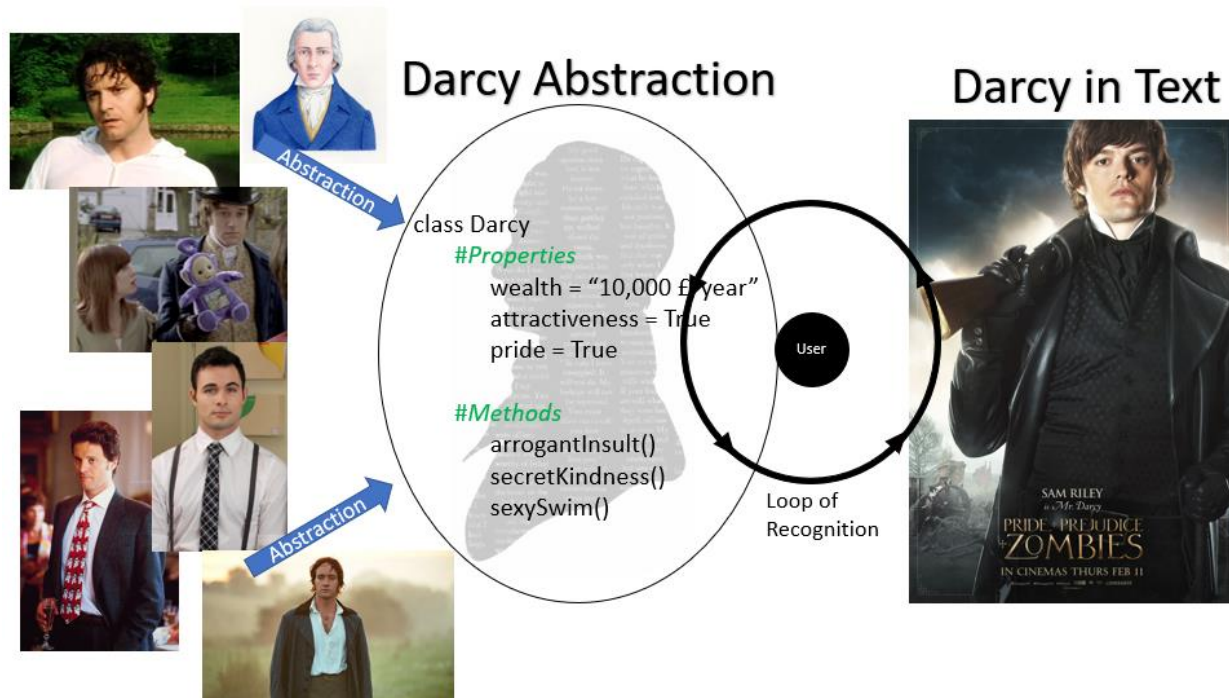


Figure 28 – Comparing a new instance of Darcy (from *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, 2016) to the user's own abstraction of the character

and predicting his behaviors in any future scenario, whether that is a world of supernatural horrors (as in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* or *Mr. Darcy, Vampyr*) or simply his honeymoon (as in Berdoll's *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife*).

The process of abstraction is, in other words, similar to the way Austen represents Elizabeth Bennet's attempts to form her own understanding of Mr. Darcy's character throughout *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth is frequently depicted throughout the novel as a "studier of character," both explicitly by other characters (Darcy's friend Bingley first coins the term when Elizabeth claims that "a deep, intricate character is more or less estimable" in her eyes [28]) and implicitly through the language associated with her attention to Darcy's words and deeds: she performs a playful "examination" of his character during her stay at Netherfield (39), is constantly described as "observing" everything from his understanding of what constitutes an "accomplished woman" (26) to "how frequently [his] eyes were fixed on her" (34), and the way

in which “she studied every sentence” of Mr. Darcy’s eventual letter of apology to her such that “she was in a fair way of soon knowing it by heart” (144). That Elizabeth (and through her, the user) is constructing a mental model of who Mr. Darcy is and how he is likely to act through careful observations of his actions and demeanor has been apparent enough even to adapters of the novel that it gets distilled in the 2005 film adaptation in the following exchange:

Darcy: Why do you ask such questions?

Elizabeth: To make out your character, Mr. Darcy.

D: What have you discovered?

E: Very little. I hear such differing accounts of you that puzzle me exceedingly.

D: I hope to afford you more clarity in the future (Working Title Films 2005).

As this exchange shows, Elizabeth’s model of Darcy is subject to change upon learning further information – coming across him in different scenarios or seeing him portrayed by others in a different light, for example – and just because he is capable of a variety of actions does not mean he will always express all of them at once.

The idea that Elizabeth forms her own personal abstraction of Darcy throughout *Pride and Prejudice* is taken even further in the novel’s version of this scene, in which Darcy himself describes Elizabeth’s evaluation of his character in terms of her attempting to make a “faithful portrait” of him (63). This proves to be a prescient analogy, as Elizabeth’s personal rendering of Darcy is solidified through her encounter with a literal portrait as she tours the halls of his estate:

In the gallery there were many family portraits. . . Elizabeth walked on in quest of the only face whose features would be known to her. At last it arrested her—and she beheld a striking resemblance to Mr. Darcy, with such a smile over the face as she remembered to have sometimes seen when he looked at her. . . . There was certainly at this moment, in Elizabeth’s mind, a more gentle sensation towards the original than she had ever felt at the height of their acquaintance. The commendation bestowed on him by [his groundskeeper] was of no trifling nature. What praise is more valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant? As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people’s happiness were in his guardianship!—how much of pleasure or pain was it in his power to bestow!—how much of good or evil must be done by him! Every idea that had been brought forward by the housekeeper was favourable to his character, and as she stood before the canvas on which he was represented, and fixed his eyes upon herself, she

thought of his regard with a deeper sentiment of gratitude than it had ever raised before; she remembered its warmth, and softened its impropriety of expression (Austen 167).

In this scene, Elizabeth is forced to compare her own mental model of Darcy – derived from observations of the properties and methods expressed in her previous experiences with him – with a new instance of the character as represented within a piece of art. When compared to her own “portrait” of Darcy, this likeness emphasizes parts of his nature that she had never before considered. This is particularly true of his tendency to smile, an action he does no less than ten times before this point in the novel but could be easily missed due to the seriousness of his demeanor. It is through this interaction between Elizabeth’s model of the abstracted Darcy “class” and a particular instance of it that she feels “a more gentle sensation toward the original than she had ever felt at the height of [her] acquaintance” with other instances of the character, opening up her understanding “how much pleasure or pain was it in his power to bestow. . . how much good or evil much by done by him” – in other words, what he is capable of being and doing when placed in new contexts (167).

The systems approach to adaptation posits that what is true for Mr. Darcy is true for texts in general: users who engage with adaptations are not engaging directly with a given source text, but with their own personal abstraction of it, one that is capable of changing and being changed by any future iteration of the text (Figure 29 below). As described in chapter 1, the loop of recognition – that is, the cyclical interpretative process of comparing elements of an adaptation with a source – uses the relatively amorphous abstraction of a text as an intermediary between the adaptation and a particular source text. The properties and methods of this abstraction (what the text “is” and how it is supposed to “behave”) originate from one’s experience with the source

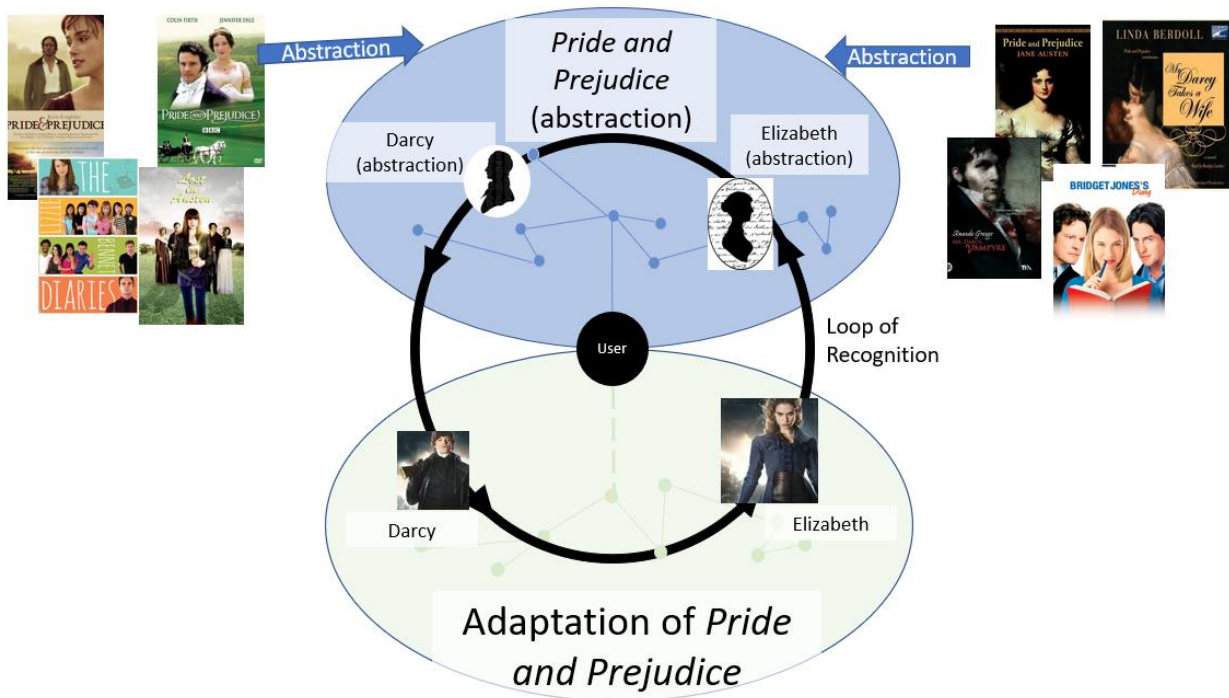


Figure 29 – Comparing an adaptation to the user's personal abstraction of *Pride and Prejudice*, which is abstracted from multiple instances of the text

and are modelled in such a way that it can operate efficiently within one's memory, thus making the abstraction necessarily fluid. When one encounters something that is dissonant with their abstraction of a text (i.e. Mr. Darcy's sudden swim in the 1995 BBC adaptation), they can interpret it in one of two ways. In the first, the adaptation has inherited many of the plot elements of their abstraction and has added new elements (the swim) in order to have it operate as a more affective instance within its system of reception (in this case, Hollywood film). In the second, the user may consider the new element to have been within the abstraction all along, always possible but only now expressed due to its unique interactions within this textual system. Embracing this latter interpretation can encourage the user to constantly restructure their understanding of how a text works and how it is related to a system of intertexts with each new instance they come across, which in turn leaves texts open to the creative (re)interpretation that lies at the heart of the process of adaptation rather than closes them off with notions of fidelity. As such, when

conceived of as a lens or perspective through which to *interpret* adaptation rather than an undeniable truth *about* adaptation, the concept of abstraction provides a middle ground between the rigid notions of fidelity and the more flexible realities of textual transformation.

Despite its relative complexity, defining the process and product of abstraction as a key component of the systems approach to adaptations has theoretical and practical benefits both for the study of game adaptations and for adaptation discourse as a whole. First, it provides a useful way of bridging the gaps between discourses like adaptation studies, genre studies, and transmedia scholarship by identifying a process shared by all of them. As disparate as they might all be, those who engage with works on this spectrum of adaptation all engage in making mental models of characters, worlds, and other narrative elements in order to hypothesize how they might operate in response to changes in their new contexts, whether that change involves run-time, medium, or wild changes to the plot. Secondly, the term “abstraction” can help scholars describe those artifacts that do not quite adapt a given text, but instead deconstruct, salvage, mash-up, or otherwise model texts or even genres without completely re-producing a full narrative. As we will see below, this is particularly important for game adaptations, which abstract sources to varying degrees and are often more beholden to game genres as they are to any particular source text. The concept of one’s mental model of a character inheriting particular properties or behaviors from multiple sources without necessarily expressing all of them out of context allows scholars to make claims about each element’s source without constraining discourse to an ontologically “true” version of any given character. Finally, and most importantly, the notion of abstraction (and the systems approach more generally) can help us see texts as what Marsha Kinder has called “database narratives,” artifacts “whose structure exposes the dual processes of selection and combination that lie at the heart of all stories and that are

crucial to language” and which thus “reveal the arbitrariness of the particular choices made and the possibility of making other combinations” (Kinder 127). In other words, thinking of adaptations and other intertextual processes as involving the abstraction and re-instantiation of discrete elements rather than a whole-cloth representation of a single source encourages us to look at texts as fields of possibility subject to revision and recombination by a variety of actors.

Case Study 1: Stride and Prejudice

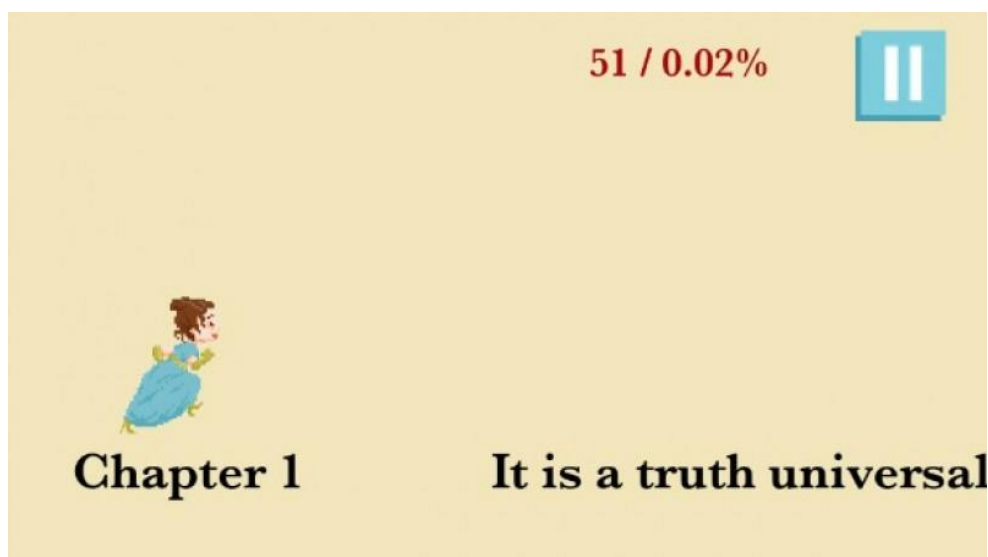


Figure 30 – Gameplay from No Crust Interactive's *Stride and Prejudice* (2013)

Due to their reliance on ever-evolving generic structures, their multimedial modes of representation, and their focus on user input, game adaptations are adept at exemplifying both the process of abstraction and its effects on interpretation. That said, not all game adaptations abstract their sources to the same extent, nor do the instances of these abstractions necessarily invite critical reflection on the source itself. Consider, for example, No Crust Interactive's *Stride and Prejudice* (2013), a game released for smartphones to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. In it, players must tap their screen to make their avatar – a pixelated version of the book's protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet – run and hop across the words of

Austen's novel as they scroll across the screen (Figure 30). The words of the text act as platforms for the ever-running Elizabeth, punctuated by periodic gaps in the text such as sentences, line breaks, and arbitrary spaces included by the developer. In "Survival" mode, players gain points for how many of the 122,189 words they can traverse without falling into a gap (which ends the run), but the game also allows players to adjust the speed of the scrolling text and continue wherever they left off without worrying about their score. While selecting even the slowest speed does not provide ideal conditions for reading the novel (a fact that even designer Carla Fisher has acknowledged), the game certainly offers a different way to interact with the text (Brown).

While the traditional use of the term "adaptation" does not immediately come to mind when confronting a game like this, looking at it in terms of the process of abstraction can add some nuance to our interpretation. The pixelated protagonist of No Crust Interactive's *Stride and Prejudice* could technically be read as an instance of the "Elizabeth" class. From the look of her pixelated clothing and hairstyle, she seems to have inherited some of the properties of Elizabeth's iterations in the 1995 BBC series and the 2005 Hollywood film (Figure 31). She even



Figure 31 – Possible references for *Stride and Prejudice*'s Elizabeth, Kiera Knightly (from the 2005 film, left) and Jennifer Ehle (from the 1995 miniseries, right)



Figure 32 – Elizabeth's trek to Netherfield in adaptations from 2005 (left) and 1995 (right)

has a smile running
across her face,
alluding to the
playfulness and wit the
heroine seems to value
in most instances of
the character across

media. Additionally, although the methods or potential actions on display here are rather simple (running and jumping) they are also not without precedent. In a display of her strong will, the Elizabeth of Austen's novel once refuses a carriage in order to travel to her sick sister on foot, "crossing field after field at a quick pace, jumping over stiles and springing over puddles with impatient activity" (21). While the film and screen versions of the story mentioned above renders this journey as a hike through the mud (Figure 32), the ever-running Elizabeth here can encourage players to reconceptualize this scene and thus Elizabeth's capabilities, consciously or unconsciously adding the "playfulRun()" method to their abstraction of the character. To engage with the game in this way, by actively comparing the pixelated Elizabeth to one's own abstraction of the character derived from multiple instances of the character, is to engage with it as a game adaptation.

By the same token, the scrolling prose of *Stride and Prejudice* could also be interpreted as a playful spin on Austen's novel, albeit one that is derived from the abstraction of the material book itself rather than the fictional world depicted within it. After all, watching words scroll by at a constant pace from left to right is more of an abstraction of actually *reading* the source text than it is an abstraction of the text's narrative or even stylistic elements. The words of the text,

and not the world it depicts, are transposed wholesale into the game space, acting merely as a platform that the pixelated Elizabeth moves across. While this could be read negatively under the paradigm of fidelity – the game literally provides a surface-level rendering of Austen’s words – it also may be regarded as a sort of witty meta-commentary on the relationship between Austen’s prose and the characters, plots, and worlds they describe. At one level, this calls attention to the way in which Austen’s texts specifically are about discourse; *Stride and Prejudice* makes concrete the difficulties of navigating social situations due to the fact dialogue in particular presents many natural gaps to jump across. Even further, however, the game’s abstraction of the words of *Pride and Prejudice* into a literal gameworld mirrors the way in which the same words undergird and give rise to fictional worlds within the mind of the reader and culture more generally. Indeed, the fact that a pixelated Elizabeth is able to act independently of the words which describe her could be said to allegorize the act of adaptation as a whole: instances of beloved characters use the materials from which they are abstracted as stepping-stones, able to exist beyond and above them as they navigate their way through multiple adaptations.

But while this game could thus be interpreted as an adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* – one that emphasizes both Elizabeth’s playfulness and the world-making power of Austen’s words in general – the scope of such a reading is limited by the way in which the game models the rest of Austen’s novel. Aside from Elizabeth, no characters, settings, or plot elements from the source text (or any of its iterations) seems to have been abstracted and utilized as an element of gameplay, nor has the plot affected the game’s structure in any way. In fact, the game itself may be just as productively examined as an instance of the “endless runner” game genre, which

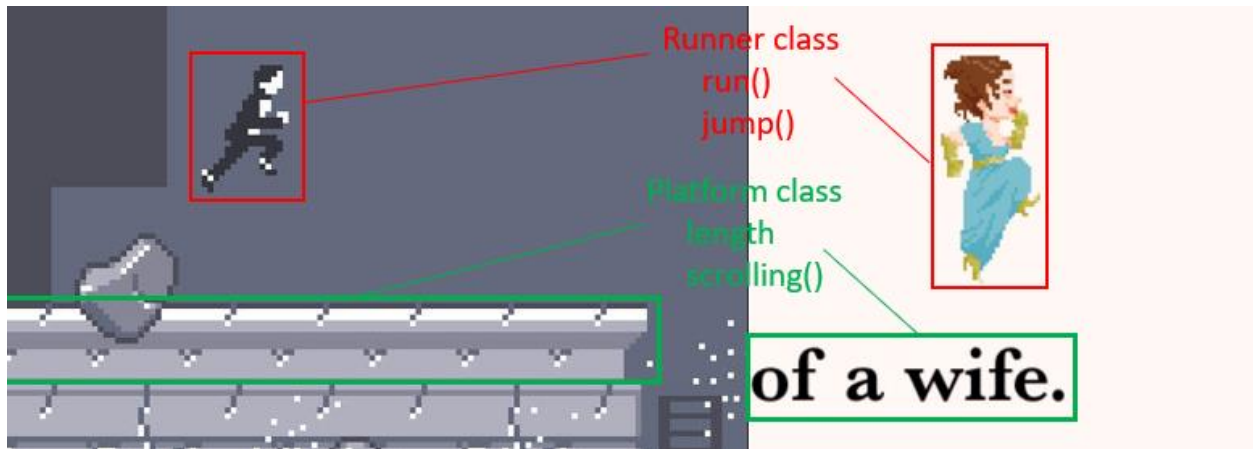


Figure 33 – Side-by-side comparison of *Canabalt* (Saltsman 2009) and *Stride and Prejudice* (2013) as instances of the "endless runner" genre

is itself an abstraction of the elements of particular games like *Canabalt* (Saltsman 2009) or *Super Mario Run* (Nintendo 2016). In this view, Elizabeth and the words of Austen's famous novel essentially operate as instances of the endless runner genre's abstract classes of avatar (with "run()" and "jump()" methods) and platforms (with "length" properties and "scrolling()" methods) (Figure 33). While this is not to say that players will or ought to see *Stride and Prejudice* in relation to its game genre over and above one's personal understanding of its source – in fact, to treat a game adaptation *as* a game adaptation is to consider it in terms of both abstractions in tandem – games which instantiate only a few elements of a source text while relying heavily on generic game mechanics do not lend themselves to the kind of sustained interpretations that more holistic adaptations might. In short, while *Stride and Prejudice* can provoke new, playful readings of the source and Elizabeth Bennet, it tells us little about the dynamic narrative system within *Pride and Prejudice* itself because it does not model many of the components of the source text as elements within a new game system.

Case Study 2: Pride and Prejudice: The Board Game



Figure 34 – Ash Grove Press's *Pride and Prejudice: The Board Game* (2002) as presented on their website (tea set not included) (Image Credit: Ash Grove Press)

If *Stride and Prejudice* could be said present a playful reading of Austen's text by instantiating a single character into a completely different game system, Ash Grove Press's *Pride and Prejudice: The Game* (2002, Figure 34) presents an abstracted version of the text without instantiating its characters. In this board game, each player is given control of a romantic couple from the book – represented by two cardboard “standees” with illustrated depictions of each character – and are tasked with maneuvering them around a brightly illustrated gameboard in an attempt to gather the five “Regency” tokens and three “Novel” tokens needed to win the game. “Regency” tokens may be purchased by visiting locales such as London or the various fictional estates of the novel and paying for them by using shillings, which are in turn gathered from

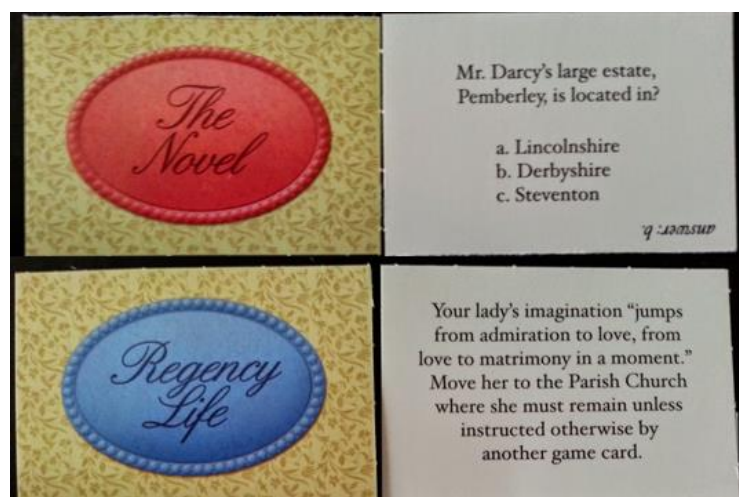


Figure 35 – Examples of "Novel" (trivia) and "Regency" (event) cards

landing on specific spaces on the board or drawing events from a “Regency Deck” (Figure 35). These events range from those mentioned in the book (such as a scandalous elopement) to more general Regency-themed events such as taking a stroll about a garden to earn a free token.

“Novel” tokens, on the other hand, may only be earned by landing on a specific space and correctly answering a trivia question about *Pride and Prejudice*. The first player to collect all of the necessary tokens and get both members of their couple to the church at the center of the board wins, having successfully orchestrated a happy marriage between two of the source text’s major characters.

While its gameplay structure is certainly reminiscent of the token-collecting and question-answering of games like *Trivial Pursuit* (Horn Abbot Company 1981), the plot structure of *Pride and Prejudice* certainly seems to have had a larger effect on the gameplay of Ashgrove Press’s game than it did on *Stride and Prejudice*. Instead of jumping across floating word-platforms, the gameboard – the geography of Austen’s storyworld abstracted into the tiles of a looping path for pawns – and the events written on the Regency cards allow players to (as its website advertises) “attend a ball at Netherfield, take tea at Rosings or stroll through the gardens at Pemberley” as the characters of the source text do (Ash Grove Press). Additionally, making marriage the explicit goal of the game aligns players’ desires with the source text’s characters’ desires, and the requirement that players visit multiple locations before marrying mirrors the way

in which the gentry of the book mingle, socialize, and pass the time. Even if the ways of achieving the goal of marriage are somewhat removed from the experiences of the characters in *Pride and Prejudice* – the characters seem disinterested in scrounging up shillings to purchase anything (let alone the equivalent of “Regency tokens”), nor are they ever tested with metatextual questions about the story they are actually in – the gameplay structure parallels the progression of Austen’s novel while simultaneously encouraging constant reference to it. When read as an adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, the mechanics and gameplay structure render Austen’s Regency-era marriage market as a competitive race requiring careful maneuvering, numerous social visits, and clever attention to (plot) details in order to “win.”

But while the game is provocative in the way it represents the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* through mechanics, it does so by facilitating a rather strict gameplay structure rather than allowing for the sort of open interpretation that arises from the interaction and recombination of



Figure 36 – Short descriptions accompanying character pawns

abstracted narrative elements. Ash Grove Press’s approach to modeling the characters of *Pride and Prejudice* is a particularly salient example of this. Aside from an illustrated rendering and a short blurb on the back of each player’s tracking card (Figure 36), the characters and the choices with which they are presented are indistinguishable from one another within the context of gameplay. Darcy is no different from Elizabeth (or, for that matter, the dastardly Wickham) in his movement, resources, or game mechanics, reducing the struggles of their courtship to the

same plodding movements that every other couple is apt to do. While the events defining each pair's journey will be different depending on the cards they happen to draw, these cards present very few opportunities for making gameplay choices beyond which of the pair will move when. Further, the game rules' mandated pairing of each of these couples (Darcy and Elizabeth, Jane and Bingley, etc.) closes off any possibility to explore other pairings or even the possibility of failure: the question of the game becomes not whether two characters will get together, but simply who will get married first. The "race to the altar" gameplay dynamic that arises from this is not necessarily inconsistent with the narrative situation of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*: one could imagine Elizabeth's meddling mother taking great delight in moving her daughters across the board as quickly as possible, content in the knowledge they are already paired with a gentleman from the beginning. But just as Mrs. Bennet seems to care less about *who* her daughters end up with than that they end up with anyone at all, so too does the game's modeling of characters as mechanically identical cardboard cutouts ignore many of their unique features, tendencies, and interactions with other characters. Instead, the symmetrical and meta-textual design of Ash Grove Press's trivia-style game lends itself to a reading of the novel that makes Elizabeth's choice of suitor and the result of their struggles with courtship seem pre-ordained and arbitrary. In fact, by this game's logic, the Elizabeth of Austen's novel actually "loses" the marriage game by finishing last, an outcome that (intentional or not) can act as a critique of the classic marriage plot when read alongside the novel.

Case Study 3: Marrying Mr. Darcy

As opposed to the rather restricted outcomes and flat playable pawns of Ash Grove Press's board game, games like Erika Svanoë's *Marrying Mr. Darcy* (2013, Figure 37) abstract



Figure 37 – Components of Erika Svanoe's *Marrying Mr. Darcy* (2013)

and instantiate Austen's characters as mechanically distinct entities whose unique characteristics and abilities drive the experience of gameplay and open up narrative and interpretative possibilities that extend beyond Austen's novel. Much like in Ash Grove Press's board game, the goal of *Marrying Mr. Darcy* is to cultivate their chosen characters' virtues – represented by quantifiable statistics of “Beauty,” “Wit,” “Friendliness,” and “Reputation” rather than tokens – in order to solidify a suitable marriage

between two of the book's characters. Unlike in Ash Grove Press's game, however, the question of who will pair up with whom depends as much on chance as it does the uniqueness of each character. Each of the eight playable heroines have differing starting statistics (properties, in the parlance of abstraction) and special abilities (methods) based upon their depiction in various iterations of *Pride and Prejudice*. The clever Elizabeth, for example, is the only heroine to begin the game with 2 points in the “Wit” statistic, while her more spontaneous younger sister Lydia has the ability to steal virtue cards from others every time a “Party” card is drawn (Figure 38). The game's potential suitors are similarly resonant



Figure 38 – Playable heroines Elizabeth and Lydia

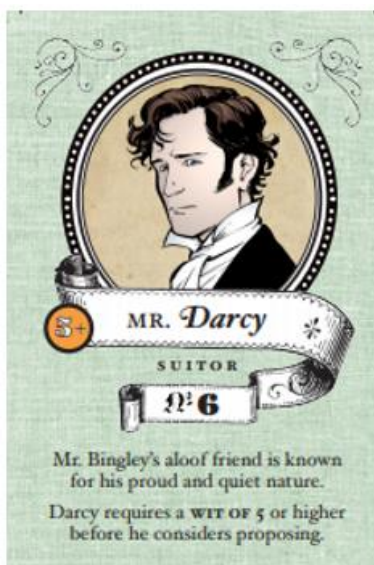


Figure 39a – Suitors Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham

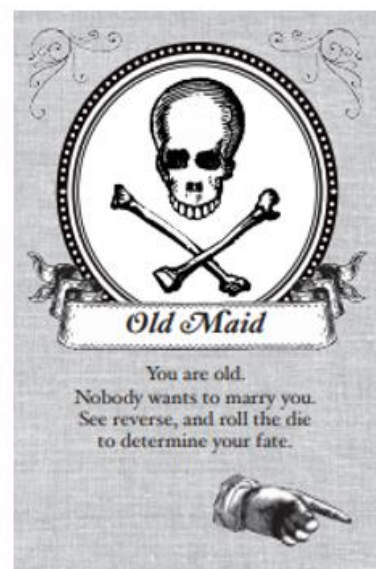
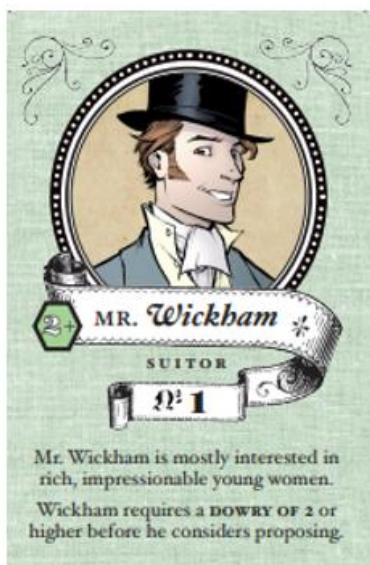


Figure 39b – "Old Maid" card

with their depictions in other versions of the story, as each will only consider proposing to a lady that meets their variously demanding criteria during the final phase of the game. The discerning Darcy is only available to those ladies that have attained 5 or more points in “Wit,” while the more worldly Wickham merely requires a that a lady have a relatively low sum of 2 “Dowry” points to consider proposing (Figure 39a). Although players are able to choose which of their eligible suitors they wish to pursue, even these proposals are not guaranteed – a suitor will only propose on a die roll of 4 or higher, meaning there is only a 50% chance that any given suitor will not propose at all. As such, players that are too picky (or too unlucky) will likely be condemned to the fate inscribed below a skull-and-crossbones on the “Old Maid” card: “You are old. Nobody wants to marry you” (Figure 39b)

Unlike the pre-ordained parings of Ash Grove Press’s game, this hyperbolically bleak outcome reminds the players of the stakes of Austen’s plot and the possibility that things could have been otherwise. The game’s design encourages players to consider (and, in fact, playfully enact) those narrative outcomes that never came to pass in Austen’s version of the story. This, in turn, requires both the players and the designers to make all sorts of interpretations of the text

ELIZABETH	JANE	MARY	KITTY	LYDIA	CAROLINE	CHARLOTTE	GEORGIANA
Darcy 15	Bingley 15	Collins 12	Denny 12	Denny 13	Fitz 14	Collins 13	Fitz 13
Fitz 12	Darcy 13	Darcy 10	Wickham 10	Wickham 12	Darcy 13	Darcy 10	Wickham 11
Bingley 11	Fitz 10	Bingley 10	Bingley 10	Bingley 11	Denny 9	Bingley 10	Bingley 11
Denny 9	Denny 10	Fitz 10	Fitz 10	Fitz 9	Collins 7	Fitz 10	Denny 8
Collins 7	Collins 8	Denny 9	Darcy 9	Darcy 8	Wickham 5	Denny 10	Collins 6
Wickham 5	Wickham 5	Wickham 5	Collins 6	Collins 5	Bingley N/A	Wickham 6	Darcy N/A

Figure 40 – Points earned for each pairing in Marrying Mr. Darcy

along the lines of these possibilities. In addition to the traits that seem to synergize with each other – Elizabeth’s high starting Wits and Mr. Darcy’s high Wit requirement, for example, makes them a much more likely pairing than, say, Lydia and Darcy – the game actually attributes point values to each pairing (Figure 40). This results in two interesting interpretative phenomena. First, the designer’s interpretations of suitable pairings sometimes directly conflict with the outcome in the book, encouraging players to reconsider alternate outcomes for characters. By Svanoe’s calculations, for example, Lydia and Wickham (who elope in the book) are actually not well suited at all; in fact, Wickham is low on the scoring chart of just about every character. Secondly, the association of numerical values to each pairing encourages us to see plot elements like character relationships not just as a certainty written by an author, but a weighted value that is influenced by a number of other properties, methods, and interactions between elements of a system. Just as a player playing Lydia could have overcome her low statistics and found love with another suitor, or a player controlling Elizabeth could have failed to secure a proposal from Darcy, so too could the novel’s characters have easily had differing outcomes. As such, the game’s structure – based upon character abstractions which can meaningfully interact within a system rather than an already existing game genre (as in *Stride and Prejudice*) or a pre-determined narrative outcome (as in Ash Grove Press’s *Pride and Prejudice: The Board Game*)

– turns what was a straightforward text into a field of narrative possibilities, which in turn encourages players to reinterpret their understandings of the source text and its characters.

As this brief (but by no means exhaustive³³) discussion of selected Austenian game adaptations has shown, considering game adaptations in terms of abstraction can open up more nuanced readings of objects that might have previously been discussed as “unfaithful adaptations” or “reskinned” versions of existing game genres. Again, this is not to say that everyone who encounters an adaptation necessarily has an identifiable abstraction of its source to which they may consciously compare, or that everyone who is exposed to the same body of texts necessarily comes up with the same abstraction of a source. Nor is it true that all game adaptations ought to be judged by the degree which they allow players to change a text’s outcome using meaningful and modular abstractions of characters – both *Stride and Prejudice* and Ash Grove Press’s board game present interpretations of *Pride and Prejudice* without offering a large field of narrative possibilities, and each can be enjoyed as game adaptations in their own right. But whereas all forms of intertextuality across media involve some level of abstraction, instantiation, and comparison, game adaptations have the potential to make this creative process legible and attainable by all who engage with them. By modeling individual elements (such as characters) in terms of operable properties and methods that are both recognizable to users and meaningful in the context of a game system, game adaptations can encourage users to explore what a text *could* be rather than merely what it seems to be, which can in turn change users’ understandings of how their literary sources operate.

***Good Society* as Austenian Abstraction**

Each of the Austenian game adaptations discussed above, to varying degrees, utilize abstraction in the same way that adaptations in other media do; they present instances of specific characters, places, and events that invite comparisons with other instances of these elements across various intertexts. But some games rely on abstraction to a greater capacity, presenting a system of rules and a variety of abstract classes and making the creative process of instantiation part of the game itself. This is the case with Vee Hendro and Hayley Gordon's *Good Society: A Jane Austen Roleplaying Game* (2018), a tabletop roleplaying game which stops short of solidifying its abstracted Austenian elements into a singular narrative. Instead, it presents rules and resources for collaboratively creating not merely a new iteration of a specific work like *Pride and Prejudice* (as the games above have done), but entirely new narratives in the style of Austen's oeuvre. While the resulting stories diverge quite a bit from Austen's canonical plotlines, the underlying rules, structure, and abstracted elements within the game system resonate with the author's writing and (especially when considered alongside the conventions of typical tabletop roleplaying games) bring to light her relationship to strategic thinking, narrative design, and the privileging of the possible over the merely probable. Understanding how *Good Society: A Jane Austen Roleplaying Game* does this requires a deeper dive into not only how the actual rules reflect Austen's storyworlds and her approach to writing, but also the ways in which the game deviates from the game genre to which it is most closely related.

Good Society as a Tabletop Roleplaying Game

Released after a successful Kickstarter campaign in October 2018, *Good Society: A Jane Austen Roleplaying Game* explicitly bills itself as “a collaborative roleplaying game that captures the heart, and countenance, of Jane Austen's work” (Gordon 3, Figure 41). In addition to



Figure 41 – Rulebook and deck of cards for Good Society
(Image Credit: Storybrewers Roleplaying)

seeming worlds apart from the more traditional adaptations discussed earlier in this chapter, the gameplay experience is also markedly different from any of the Austenian game adaptations cited above. Instead of giving players control of specific characters from Austen’s books (as even *Stride and Prejudice* does), players in *Good Society* are tasked with making their own based upon

vague Regency-era archetypes like the well-connected “Dowager” or the scheming “Socialite;” instead of quantifiable elements such as Ash Grove Press’s shilling tokens or *Marrying Mr. Darcy*’s statistics representing virtues, the capabilities of these characters are largely defined by their social background and how players interpret the evocative statements on cards which represent their characters’ desires, relationships, and social connections. While the game does contain some of the accoutrements we might expect from typical games – character sheets, rules, various types of cards – much of the actual game unfolds in players’ heads as they take turns narrating what actions their character is likely to take within an imagined storyworld. There is not even a condition by which players win or lose, merely an expectation that they will “pursue [their] characters’ desires and objectives, and use them to complicate other characters’ lives,” thus creating a suitably dramatic story that “is intended to mirror the experience of journeying

through an Austen novel, in both its substance and the manner of its telling” (6). Mechanically speaking, it would not be inaccurate to call *Good Society* a structured game of make-believe.³⁴

But just because *Good Society* is a game of make-believe does not mean it is not a game. In fact, not only does the game fit the criteria of the term “game” as discussed in chapter 1 – it is a playable, expressive system from which experiences arise – but it also may be productively read as participating in one of the most influential and longest-running genres in contemporary gaming: tabletop roleplaying games. Originating in the mechanically dense tactical war games of the mid-20th century, tabletop roleplaying games (henceforth TTRPGs) are based around a group of players taking on the role of characters inhabiting an imaginary world, usually simulated through quantifiable statistics, an intricate ruleset, and the rolling of polyhedral dice. While more contemporary TTRPGs (*Good Society* included) have emphasized narrative and dramatic elements of the roleplaying genre, its roots in tactical war simulation and fantasy adventure still reverberate through its multiple iterations. Understanding *Good Society* in terms of its relationship to (and deviations from) the TTRPG genre not only unlocks new resonances with its Austenian source texts, but also illustrates how the game and the TTRPG genre as a whole are centered around the process of abstraction. As such, this section will provide a brief history and overview of the conventions of traditional TTRPGs before examining how *Good Society* deviates from this model and how those deviations resonate with Austen’s own narrative designs in the sections that follow.

While it is true that the TTRPG genre is built upon and concerned with abstracting events, individuals, and processes into playable game systems, understanding the extent and effect of this design ethos requires an examination of the hobby from this focus was inherited: military wargaming. While military wargaming has its roots in dice-based simulations of warfare

used to train European officers in the 19th century,³⁵ the games that would directly inspire TTRPGs emerged from the complex rulesets produced by civilian hobbyists in the years after World War II. What started as a small community sharing house rules and game reports through self-published magazines in the 1950s slowly but surely grew more popular over the ensuing decades, encouraging companies and creators to release fully-developed rules and miniatures to simulate a wide variety of conflicts. In their translation of real events into a system of rules that could be examined, understood, and played with, one would be justified in saying these artifacts function as game adaptations with war as the source text. Regardless of whether or not one considers war (or any historical event, for that matter) as an adaptable text in itself, the important thing about these artifacts in the context of this project is the way they allow for the creative exploration of historical possibilities rather than depict a single scripted representation of events to follow by rote.³⁶ Donald Featherstone, a popular wargame designer in the early days of the hobby, states this explicitly in the introduction to his 1962 compendium of war games:

For the player who finds nothing of interest in this list [of historical battles], there are imaginary campaigns that he may fight without limit. He can form his imaginary world, with continents and countries each of which will make war on its neighbor on the slightest pretext. . . . Therein lies one of the fascinations of war gaming – one can remake history to suit one's own ideas, can alter the complete trend of events by refighting a major battle such as Waterloo and making the French win it – imagine what would have been the result if the French had won in 1815 and then see just how powerful the war gamer can make himself (18-19).³⁷

More than just acting as a systemic interpretation of historical battles, then, wargames gave players the tools to explore endless possibilities and express their own interpretations of history by engaging with an abstracted version of era-specific warfare.

It was this notion of imagination within combat-focused abstractions that gave rise to *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974), which serves as the ur-text for the genre of tabletop roleplaying games to which *Good Society* traces its lineage. The creators of *Dungeons and Dragons* – Gary

Gygax and Dave Arneson, both avid wargamers – began to experiment with supplementing medieval wargames with elements from their favorite fantasy novels, such as wizards who could cast tide-turning spells and trolls that could easily match a battalion of soldiers. Arneson eventually gathered his wargaming friends to join him for a modified version of a wargame, in which players controlled heroic individuals rather than vast armies and watched their characters become more powerful over time by defeating monsters and accomplishing quests. To supplement and refine this gameplay system, Arneson and Gygax developed a ruleset in which an individual character would have multiple quantifiable statistics (representing things like strength, intelligence, and dexterity) which allowed them to accomplish a range of adventurous feats, from swinging a sword to casting spells. These abilities would be determined and modified by one's race (initially men, elves, dwarves, and hobbits) and class (fighting-men, magic-users, and clerics), allowing for the creation of distinct characters and encouraging a cooperative group dynamic in order to succeed. Once characters were determined, players would be lead through perilous dungeons full of treasures, traps, and monsters designed and controlled by Arneson, who acted as the referee. Gygax and Arneson eventually codified and published the first edition of their new ruleset in 1974 under the name *Dungeons and Dragons*, and it would prove to be wildly popular among wargamers and – especially after the publication of the more polished design of *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* in 1977 – the public at large.

In a move that resonates with *Good Society's* literary origins, the design of *Dungeons and Dragons* can be easily seen as an abstraction of many of the fantasy and science-fiction books that Gygax and Arneson were reading at the time. In his book *Playing at the World*, Jon Peterson traces the origins of the game's thematic and mechanical elements to a wide range of literary works, including J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1955), Robert E. Howard's *Conan the*

Barbarian series (1950), Poul Anderson's *Three Hearts and Three Lions* (1961), H.P. Lovecraft's "Cthulhu Mythos", the adventure stories of Edgar Rice Burroughs and Fritz Lieber, and a wide variety of classic fairy tales (Peterson 83). Some of these elements – like the existence of Tolkienian creatures like ents, hobbits, and balrogs in the first edition, complete with numerical values representing their armor, damage, and special resistances – are obvious abstractions of literary elements (obvious enough, in fact, to earn a "cease-and-desist" letter from the Tolkien estate in 1977 [Peterson 118]). But more subtle abstractions are built into the game's mechanics as well. The mechanics for casting spells – while largely mirroring the laws of magic described in Jack Vance's *Dying Earth* books (1950-1954) – draws inspiration from a wide range of media, from djinni-summoning rituals akin to those in *Tales of the Arabian Nights* to the *Star Trek*-inspired "Teleport" spell (Peterson 170-171). Similarly, the basic game loop of exploring dangerous dungeons, fighting monsters, and becoming more powerful similarly follows the basic structure of pulp adventure serials like *Conan the Barbarian* (Peterson 130). The class-based system of roles – literally abstraction as it defines characters in terms of properties and methods – is as much a borrowing of medieval class hierarchies as it is a formalized expression of the magicians and fighters of Howard and Anderson's stories. More importantly, the need to coordinate with other players to make a relatively diverse adventuring party mirrors the dynamics of Tolkien's multi-species fellowships in *The Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings*. The rules of the game as well as these particular elements thus can be seen as a mashup of multiple abstractions of these texts, resulting in a system that allows players to creatively combine aspects of their favorite genre tropes in order to create an experience that resonates with these fantasy novels.

In making a TTRPG system from Austen's body of work, then, the creators of *Good Society* are actually adhering to the tradition of open-ended abstraction that defines the genre. TTRPGs turn a body of specific sources (whether that is pulp sci-fi and fantasy novels or Jane Austen's bibliography) into operable abstractions defined by various properties and methods. Instead of then creating specific instances of these abstractions and guiding users through a pre-set sequence of events (as someone making a typical adaptation or genre film might), the designers of TTRPGs simply present an abstracted model of the character, leaving the work of instantiation to the users. Players are not given control over Tolkien's Bilbo or Howard's Conan the Barbarian specifically, but they can use the abstracted ruleset to create their own instances of a sneaky hobbit or a human fighter – or, more interestingly, players can combine these abstracted properties and methods into entirely new characters and scenarios. In so doing, TTRPGs make plain the process at the heart of adaptation, genre formation, and any other act of transformative intertextuality while simultaneously inviting audiences to co-author new instances of characters, worlds, and narratives through play. Of course, some of the interpretatively generative comparisons between abstracted game rules and their intertextual sources can become muted when applied to a wide-ranging corpus of generically-related texts; in the nearly half-century since its original edition, the tropes and texts that originally inspired *Dungeons and Dragons* have become obscured by not only new evolutions in the fantasy genre but also the game's own history and lore. As a TTRPG with a more condensed and identifiable core of source material, *Good Society* more readily lends itself to the loop of recognition associated with adaptation as users compare their understandings of Austenian characters, settings, and events with their mechanical abstractions. But this is not merely a dyadic relationship between source and adaptation; when read alongside the conventions of traditional TTRPGs – or, more accurately,

how the game system deviates from them – the resonances between *Good Society* and Austen become all the more compelling.

***Good Society's* Austenian Deviations from Standard TTRPGs**

For the purposes of exploring how *Good Society* deviates from the standard TTRPG model, I have identified three core design elements that originated within *Dungeons and Dragons* and have been shared by the majority of TTRPGs since. The first of these core design elements is the abstraction of character capabilities into quantifiable statistics and discrete abilities befitting of a combat-oriented fantasy world. The classic six attributes of *D&D*-inspired TTRPGs encompass both physical capabilities (strength, dexterity, and constitution for feats of athleticism) as well as non-physical traits that could become useful in an adventuring scenario (intelligence for deciphering ancient tomes, wisdom for resisting corrupting magic, and charisma for charming one's way past foes). The game's classes and fantasy races also bestow certain abilities to player characters such as spellcasting or the use of particular weapons and armor. These quantitative elements feed into the second core design element of classic TTRPGs: a dice-based conflict resolution system. When a player wants their character to do something, they usually state or narrate what they wish to accomplish, decide which of their statistics and abilities will affect the roll, and then roll some sort of dice (usually a single twenty-sided die, known as a d20) in an attempt to reach or exceed a target number which represents the difficulty of the task. This target number is determined by the third major element of the TTRPG genre: the conversational game structure driven by a player acting as a "game master" (GM).³⁸ Rather than rigid turns, phases, and win-states, TTRPGs proceed as a conversation between those playing characters and the GM. While personal styles of running a game may vary, the GM in a

traditional TTRPG is less an opponent to the players and more of an operating system, handling all of the interactions between players and the imaginary world using rules dictated by the rulebook while also populating it with monsters, traps, and treasures for the players to encounter. Because no ruleset can control for all (or even most) of the creative circumstances that players find themselves in, the plot, shape, and length of any TTRPG scenario is largely left up to the GM and the players at the table: barring the simultaneous death of all player characters, a series of interconnected sessions can last for months or even years, so long as the players continue to meet and the GM comes up with new challenges for their characters to overcome. Although the rules of *Dungeons and Dragons* and TTRPGs based on its model have been anything but stagnant since the 1970s, these core gameplay mechanics – numerical abstractions, a dice-based conflict resolution system, and a loose game structure in which narrative control is largely concentrated within the figure of the GM – remain common across most examples of the genre.³⁹ More importantly for this project, examining how *Good Society* deviates from these core features provides an interpretatively rich glimpse into how the game abstracts Austen.

Deviation 1: Game Structure and Austen as Designer

The first major way in which *Good Society*'s approach to abstracting Austen deviates from the traditional TTRPG model – its comparatively rigid and non-hierarchical game structure – actually resonates with Austen's approach to narrative design. Excluding character creation (which can be completed individually before play begins), the gameplay of traditional TTRPGs in the style of *Dungeons and Dragons* can be broken down into two major modes or phases: narration and combat. As described in the section above, this first phase constitutes a freeform conversation between the players (each of which control a single character) and the game master

(GM), who describes the gameworld, controls all monsters and non-player characters, and determines when players must roll dice in an attempt to overcome obstacles. Unlike in many other game genres, there are no turns, goals, or overall win/lose states save for the arbitrary and provisional ones established by the players or GM. However, once players start combat (a common occurrence in the action-oriented fantasy fiction on which TTRPGs are often based), gameplay becomes much more organized and much more complicated. The rulebook for the fifth edition of *Dungeons and Dragons*, for example, includes entire sections on positional combat mechanics like specific ranges and areas of effect for spells, various conditions that can slow, incapacitate, or otherwise hinder enemies, and bonuses that result from flanking enemies or taking the high ground (Crawford et. al 189, 202, 290). The relative depth of these mechanics – alongside the booming industry of physical miniatures to represent characters, table-sized dungeon maps, and modifiable terrain – encourage players and GMs alike to structure play around these violent encounters, and to play out the kind of exciting, heroic battles contained within the pulp fantasy fiction from which the system is abstracted.

This relatively loose, combat-oriented structure places a great deal of narrative and structural authority on the figure of the GM. The original edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* set this precedent early on:

PREPARING FOR THE CAMPAIGN: The referee [GM] bears the entire burden here, but if care and thought are used, the reward will more than repay [them]. First, the referee must draw out a minimum of half a dozen maps of the levels of [their] “underworld”, people them with monsters of various horrid aspect, distribute treasures accordingly, and note the location of the latter two on keys, each corresponding to the appropriate level. This operation will be more fully described in the third volume of these rules. When this task is completed the participants can then be allowed to make their first descent into the dungeons. . . (Gygax and Arneson 5)

Despite the later inclusion of pre-written maps and story material for the GM to use, this sense of the GM as the singular architect of the gameworld is still prevalent within the genre, as is the

inclusion of an entire separate rulebook to help the GM complete this task. During the game itself, the GM's role as arbiter during non-combat dice rolls (they determine both difficulty and consequences of player actions) and the fact they control all enemies during combat gives them much more power over the narrative than the other players do. This extends to the greater structure of the game as well, as the GM's designs largely determine whether or not players get into combat and how often they might do so. As mentioned above, the rules of traditional TTRPGs seldom define when or why any game session or series of sessions (traditionally called a "campaign," a term borrowed from the genre's roots in wargaming) is supposed to end, giving the GM a large amount of control over the world of the game and thus the events that may possibly occur there. Players, by contrast, have a great deal of control over their character's choices, making both tactical decisions and narrative choices from within the possibility space established by the GM. The resulting dynamic that emerges from GM control and player choices mirrors the episodic, action-fueled structure of the fantasy/sci-fi stories on which the game was largely based.

Instead of a relatively open-ended and combat-oriented play session of classic TTRPGs,

CYCLE OF PLAY	
1	Novel Chapter
2	Reputation
3	Rumour and Scandal
4	Epistolary
5	Novel Chapter
6	Reputation
7	Epistolary
8	Upkeep

Good Society evokes its source material by instituting a rather rigid "cycle of play" that mirrors an Austen novel (Gordon 12). Rather than allowing players to make characters individually, the game begins with a mandatory "Collaboration" phase, in which players collectively determine each

Figure 42 – *Good Society's Cycle of Play*

character's backstory, how they relate to each other, and general expectations for the story's

tone. The game then proceeds through an eight-phase cycle, meant to be repeated over multiple sessions (Gordon 112, Figure 42). During the “Novel Chapter” phase – a title which inescapably evokes a literary structure rather than a free-form, combat-oriented one – players act out scenes as their characters and are encouraged to “pursue your secret desire, exploiting reputation, rumors and connections to secure your advantage,” much like the narration phase of typical TTRPGs (12). After each player has had a chance to act out a scene and move the drama along, the game moves to the “Reputation” phase, in which players collectively determine the mechanical and narrative results of their characters’ actions and are awarded “Reputation Tags” that may be leveraged in later phases. This is followed by a similar “Rumors and Scandals” phase, where players leverage those gained or lost reputation points to complicate matters for their characters or others. Finally, in the “Epistolary” phase, players either dictate or literally write out their character’s thoughts about the current situation as if they were writing a letter to a friend or acquaintance – a common occurrence in Austen’s novels, particularly the early drafts of *Pride and Prejudice*.⁴⁰ These phases are repeated in the same order to complete a cycle of play representing a three-to-four-hour session, ending with an “Upkeep” phase in which players can adjust their characters’ goals in preparation for the next session. This cycle, in many ways, acts as an abstraction of an Austenian text, modeling its structural elements in terms of individual and operable pieces of a larger system.

Aside from mirroring the general episodic shape of an Austen novel, this strict cycle of play in *Good Society* de-emphasizes the role of the GM as the source of narrative authority. In fact, the core rulebook goes out of its way to make this point explicit:

In most games of *Good Society*, one person will take the role of Facilitator [GM]. Unlike many traditional roleplaying games, the Facilitator in *Good Society* does not have unlimited narrative control. They do not plan how the story will go, or determine the actions of all the supporting characters. Instead, the Facilitator shares creative power

equally with the players. They play a vital role in bringing the best out of the players, and making the game feel like an Austen novel (Gordon 10).

Rather than the toiling architect implied by the description of a GM in *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Good Society*'s conception of the role is one of a catalyst for creativity (hence the name "Facilitator"). The game's mechanics model the GM only slightly differently from any other player: they are free to make their own major character and pursue their goals (11), they must stick to the tone collectively established during the "Collaboration" phase (10), and instead of having free rein over the gameworld, they are only given an extra Resolve Token to use against others (70). Additionally, the game's rigid structure removes the need for anyone to control the game's pace. In fact, as the clause "in most games" implies, players may even choose to play without a GM at all and instead distribute the role's duties among all players (174-175). The fact that this variant barely requires two pages to explain only emphasizes the trivial nature of such a role in a TTRPG abstracted from a body of work focused on character relationships within a strict social structure rather than one abstracted from the exploits of adventuresome heroes and epic battles. *Good Society*'s rigid structure of play thus acts as a creative constraint around which players must collaboratively design a dramatically interesting narrative.

Good Society's rigid structure and collaborative ethos also resonates with Austen and her reception on a deeper level, lending credence to Mike Goode's framing of Jane Austen as "an innovative theorist and practitioner of the novel as a design medium" (5). In his 2020 book *Romantic Capabilities*, Goode posits that an attention to a given text's present-day "media behaviors" – that is, the similar ways in which it has been repeatedly remediated, re-invoked, or/and adapted into particular media forms – can act as "a point of entry through which to access broader literary, media, philosophical, and political histories bound up with the text" (8).⁴¹ In the case of Austen, Goode claims that the divergent narratives and celebration of Regency settings

within the glut of realist Austen fanfiction not only embodies Austen's exploration of the possible (more on that in the following sections) but also "collectively turns Austen's novels into a medium of design," meant to be constantly reconfigured, rewritten, and redesigned (13). To support this claim, Goode points to how the vast majority of Austen fanfiction (unlike many other fanfiction archives) seems to be invested in creating new or altered stories within the same general setting. Even when exploring new venues or characters, Austen fanfiction still gravitates to certain places within this same general setting, with English gentlemen's country estates being the most central of these key places. When read together as a media behavior, this has the "collective effect of transforming its casts of characters into medial collaborators through and with whom different gentlemen's estates characteristically operate and reveal what they are capable of" (205). In other words, when viewed collectively, Goode argues that the individual characters of realist Austen fanfiction are abstracted into what I am calling "classes" within an Austenian system, collections of "recyclable and supplemental materials whose capabilities are unlocked through arrangement, combination, restructuration, and reuse" (206). As such, the repeated reading of Austenian fanfiction (like the repeated iterations of a gameplay loop) grants us insight into not only what any individual instance of these characters are capable of, but also how Austen's settings operate as a system which is *itself* capable of giving rise to particular interactions, behaviors, and experiences.

While Goode likens this collection of elements to a "software development kit" (a term which certainly resonates with digital games) we could just as easily apply this frame to abstracted analog game systems like *Good Society*. By abstracting Austen's characters, plot structure, and setting into a playable system, *Good Society* does not merely participate in the place-making media behavior of Austen fanfiction that Goode describes: it embodies and

facilitates this behavior for its players. Like many Austen games, *Good Society* is at least in part a product of Austen fandom: designers Vee Hendro and Hayley Gordon are self-professed Austen fans, and the game itself was funded through individual donations on Kickstarter (Tye). Further, its institution of the fictional town of Habershire – a “town [that is] is small enough to ensure an acquaintance between all its foremost inhabitants. . .but not so small that its gentry cannot hold a sizable ball” (Gordon 5-6) – mirrors the “obsessive return to and redesign of the *oikos* of the English country estate” characteristic of many pieces of Austen fanfiction (Goode 209). In fact, the final section of *Good Society*’s rulebook – an overview of Regency-era locations, past-times, historical events, and genre conventions entitled “Knowing Austen” – goes so far as to make the “place-making” described by Goode explicit while simultaneously initiating players into this fan-inflected Austenian world:

So, you've never read an Austen novel? The following is a brief guide to the locations, events, pastimes, tropes, and plot twists to help you fake it 'til you make it (to the library or bookstore). While this chapter aims to be as historically accurate as possible, our goal is to capture the world of Austen's works rather than Regency society as it existed historically. After all, this fictional world is the true setting of *Good Society* (Gordon 247).

By presenting players with information on the historical and stylistic contexts of Austen’s novels to supplement a ruleset designed to generate Austenian narrative experiences, *Good Society* is essentially inducting players into the ranks of Austen fanfiction writers, encouraging the uninitiated to play within this possibility space before even journeying into the source text.

But Goode goes further still, suggesting that it may be productive to examine Austen herself – and not just the fanfiction authors that came after her – as “theorizing [her] realist project in terms of *design* and *place-making* as opposed to *representation* and *truth-telling*” (233, emphasis original). Latent within the author’s six novels and various personal correspondence lies an interest in design and experimentation which uses the figure of the

English country estate as a center point. For Goode, this is particularly prevalent when one pays attention to how the discourse surrounding landscape gardening – language that Austen and her high-society contemporaries would likely be familiar with – was largely built around the notion that any given landscape was full of “capability,” inherent features that could be activated and brought forth by the hand of a competent landscape designer and felt through interaction with the space (221). The fact that Austen’s canonical estates are written and rewritten thus “renders fiction visible as a design medium whose medial relation to the potentials of the canonical place or universe is contingent,” an approach to novel-writing that is already apparent in Austen’s writings (212). Goode goes on to describe Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814) as being particularly indicative of this design ethos, citing how Austen describes the journey of protagonist Fanny Price in terms of the carefully controlled manipulations of external designers:

A seemingly fragile flower and tractable puppy at first, Fanny nevertheless amounts by the end of the novel more to an invasive weed or an experiment in animal husbandry gone awry, at least from the perspective of the experiment’s initial design. But this is also the kind of experiment in which every participant is trying to manipulate the result – less an experiment in pure science (botany) than in interactive design (say, gardening) and direction (say, theater) – and Sir Thomas is not above radically redesigning the entire experiment in order to achieve whatever narrative results, phase states, or system states he has come to desire (Goode 237).

This sounds very much like the kind of narrative design and manipulation that *Good Society* affords to its players through its mechanics. The “Collaboration” phase operates as an initial moment of design, but the use of resolve tokens over dice rolls encourages the sort of multi-participant manipulation and experimental redesigns of Sir Thomas and other characters. What is more, *Good Society* requires that each player takes on not only a singular character (as is the case in most TTRPGs), but one to three minor characters called “Connections,” each of which have their own smaller agendas and relationships to other player-characters. When mixed with the requirement of major Desires and Relationships, the Collaboration Phase of *Good Society*

becomes a major moment of narrative design for the entire table, requiring them to set up a compelling network of competing characters and goals in order to create a compelling gameplay experience – a task that some have argued is as strategic as it is creative.

Deviation 2: Character Creation and Strategic Thinking

The second of *Good Society*'s major deviations from the traditional TTRPG model is its qualitative approach to abstracting player characters, a feature which – when read alongside the tactical elements of typical TTRPGs – highlights Austen's own approaches to strategic thinking. As stated previously, typical TTRPGs in the style of *Dungeons and Dragons* tend to model player characters based on statistics (properties) representing core attributes like “Strength” or “Dexterity” and discrete abilities (methods) representing spell usage, combat maneuvers, or other special skills. This approach to abstraction tells us a great deal about what is important in both the game system and the sources on which it is based (or, more accurately, the designers' own abstracted interpretation of these sources). In the case of *Dungeons and Dragons* – a system abstracted from pulp sci-fi and fantasy novels – characters are modeled largely based on their aptitude for combat and adventuring. The character sheet of the most recent edition (Figure 43, below) prominently features cells for numerical representations of various attributes and skills any given character is likely to possess. This quantifiable approach to abstraction tells us not only which traits and actions are most salient in this system and the setting it represents (“Athletics” and “Acrobatics” are deemed useful and common enough to be differentiated, while the many tasks that could constitute a “Performance” are condensed into one skill), but also how these elements actually function. In this model, “Charisma” is an inherent trait that can be quantified and compared as easily as someone's “Strength,” and possessing a high or low score

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®

Fitzwilliam
CHARACTER NAME

Rogue 1
CLASS & LEVEL

Human
RACE

Noble
BACKGROUND

Neutral
ALIGNMENT

Jane
PLAYER NAME

13
ARMOR CLASS

+3
INITIATIVE

30
SPEED

10
Hit Point Maximum
CURRENT HIT POINTS

1
HIT DICE

13
STRENGTH
+1
13

+3
DEXTERITY
+3
16

+0
CONSTITUTION
+0
11

+2
INTELLIGENCE
+2
15

-1
WISDOM
-1
9

+1
CHARISMA
+1
13

+2
PROFICIENCY BONUS

9
PASSIVE WISDOM (PERCEPTION)

Skills:
 Strength (+2)
 Dexterity (+3)
 Constitution (+0)
 Intelligence (+2)
 Wisdom (-1)
 Charisma (+1)
 Acrobatics (Dex)
 Animal Handling (Wis)
 Arcana (Int)
 Athletics (Str)
 Deception (Cha)
 History (Int)
 Insight (Wis)
 Intimidation (Cha)
 Investigation (Int)
 Medicine (Wis)
 Nature (Int)
 Perception (Wis)
 Performance (Cha)
 Persuasion (Cha)
 Religion (Int)
 Sleight of Hand (Dex)
 Stealth (Dex)
 Survival (Wis)

Attacks & Spellcasting:
 Unarmed: +3, 2 Bludgeoning
 Rapier: +5, 1d8+3 Piercing

Equipment:
 15 Leather Armor
 2 Rapier
 0 Arrows
 0 Backpack
 0 Rations (1 Day)
 0 Torch
 0 Fine Clothing
 0 Riding Boots
 1000

Other Proficiencies & Languages:
 Armor: Light Armor
 Weapons: Crossbow, Hand, Longsword, Rapier, Shortsword, Simple Weapons
 Tools: Thieves' Tools, Three-Dragon Ante Set, Vehicles (Land)
 Languages: Common, Quori, Thieves' Cant

Actions:
 Standard Actions: Attack, Cast a Spell, Dash, Disengage, Dodge, Help, Hide, Ready, Search, Use an Object, Opportunity Attack, Grapple, Shove, Improvise, Two-Weapon Fighting, Interact with an Object
 Special: Sneak Attack
 Once per turn, you can deal an extra 1d6 damage to one creature you hit with an attack with a finesse or ranged weapon if you have advantage on the attack roll. You don't need advantage on the attack roll if another enemy of the target is within 5 ft. of it, that enemy isn't incapacitated, and you don't have disadvantage on the attack roll.

Personality Traits, Ideals, Bonds, Flaws:

Figure 43 – A sample character sheet for Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition
(Image Credit: Wizards of the Coast 2014)

in either affect one's chances at successfully completing a suite of associated skills. Everything else – such as a character's personality traits, ideals, bonds, and flaws – are crammed into small boxes on the far right of the character sheet, signifying their relatively small effect on how each character functions in the action-oriented gameplay system.⁴²

This quantitative abstraction of player characters in traditional TTRPG systems makes them well-suited for one type of activity above all others: combat. Nearly every element that appears on this character sheet – from calculated values like “Initiative” or “Armor Class” to the bonuses granted by magic items to the player’s choice of character class and (problematically) species/race – is designed to have some effect on how they behave in battle, which is of course consistent with the fantasy novels on which they based their abstractions. Consider the original

description of character classes contained within the first volume of the 1974 boxed set of *Dungeons and Dragons*, which mirror three major archetypes of medieval fantasy stories:

Fighting-Men: All magical weaponry is usable by fighters, and this is in itself a big advantage. In addition, they gain the advantage of more “hit dice” (the score of which determines how many points of damage can be taken before a character is killed). . . .

Magic-Users: Top level magic-users are perhaps the most powerful characters in the game, but it is a long, hard road to the top, and to begin with they are weak, so survival is often the question, unless fighters protect the low-level magical types until they have worked up. . . . Magic-Users may arm themselves with daggers only. . . .

Clerics: Clerics gain some of the advantages, from both of the other two classes . . . in that they have the use of magic armor and all non-edged magic weapons (no arrows!), plus they have numbers of their own spells (Gygax and Arneson 6, 7).

Not only do these descriptions give players an idea of how powerful each character is on the battlefield (the fighting-man’s high amount of “hit dice,” the cleric’s use of both spells and non-edged magic weapons), but they begin to encourage particular styles of play within a combat scenario, urging fighting-men to protect their weaker companions. While the most recent edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* does not immediately discuss combat tactics in their descriptions of each class (each instead begins with narrative descriptions of possible iterations of each class), the first mechanical information presented under “Class Features” remains hit dice and weapon proficiencies (Crawford et al. 47) – the characters of TTRPGs remain bound to battle.

While the quantifiable properties, action-oriented methods, and combat-centric design of TTRPGs like *Dungeons and Dragons* are useful abstractions of adventuresome heroes of science fiction and fantasy, an examination of how Austen’s characters interact with their narrative surroundings results in a very different model in *Good Society*. Instead of numerical data and lists of abilities, a typical character sheet in *Good Society* (Figure 44, below) is filled with evocative statements meant to help players better understand how their character might act within the fictional Regency-era world of the game. Each of the game’s ten character “Roles” – similar to the “classes” of *Dungeons and Dragons* in that they are abstractions of particular

Character Role

Wherever it is you were in these past years, it was certainly nothing like here. These people are strange to you; their habits, manners, and views as if lifted from a theatre play. Still, to the outsider comes the gift of objective observation. You view their dramas as a spectator, able to see what the actors cannot. It's a skill you will need if you are to prove your own ambitions among them.

NAME _____ AGE _____

APPEARANCE: *e.g. graceful, modest, foreign.*

TEMPERAMENT: *e.g. amiable, aloof, mercenary.*

CONNECTIONS

Uncle/aunt, sibling, cousin, childhood friend, childhood rival, militia/naval friend, friend from abroad, suitor.

THE NEW ARRIVAL IS...

- ☒ Aloof and mysterious
- ☒ Brimming with hidden secrets
- ☒ A novelty
- ☒ A pawn in local politics

AS A PLAYER, YOU WILL...

- ☒ Respect the decisions of Collaboration
- ☒ Take action to pursue desires
- ☒ Accept & orchestrate your own misfortunes
- ☒ Contribute to the story
- ☒ Support other players

Inner Conflict

_____ vs _____

- ☐ You took action in pursuit of this. ☐
- ☐ You sacrificed something important to you for this. ☐
- ☐ You hurt, or pushed away someone important to you for this. ☐
- ☐ You degraded your reputation or went against your conscience for this. ☐
- ☐ Your actions in pursuit of this side of the conflict destroyed your chance of successfully pursuing the other. ☐

Reputation

△ **UNEXPECTED CONNECTION**
A famous, wealthy, or aristocratic connection you made abroad arrives in town. Create them as a connection. While this condition is active you remain their favourite.

△ **QUITE INDEBTED**
Choose a connection. Until this condition is erased, this connection is in your debt for good deeds you performed while away.

▽ **GREAT OFFENCE**
Your actions are offensive to someone of local importance, and they mean to make it known publicly.

▽ **FRACTURE**
Someone close to you is appalled by your behaviour and refuses to talk to you.

The New Arrival

Figure 44 – A blank character sheet for the "New Arrival" archetype in Good Society

character archetypes – has a unique character sheet already populated with information tailored to that role. Much of this information, such as the descriptive paragraph and bulleted list of character traits on the left side of the sheet, is meant to aid the player in acting as a particular Austenian archetype, while the “Reputation” section represents specific actions that can be triggered during the course of a game. For example, the character sheet for the “New Arrival” role (which the rulebook explicitly associates with Mr. Darcy [224]) describes the role as “aloof and mysterious,” “a novelty,” and one who has “the gift of objective observation” by virtue of being an outsider, and also includes the “Quite Indebted” Reputation ability, which can be used on another character to put them in one’s debt for “good deeds you performed while away.” These special abilities, however, only trigger once a player has accrued enough Reputation,

which is gained or lost according to the list on the player's "Family Background" sheet (Figure

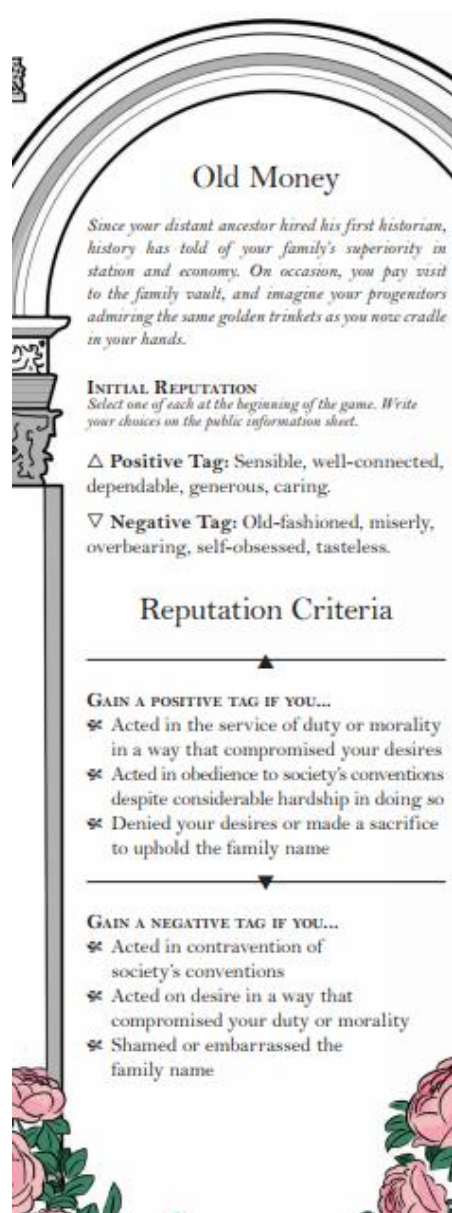


Figure 45 – A "Family Background" sheet for the "Old Money" background

45). Each of these backgrounds (such as "Old Money," "Clergy," or "Humble Origins") may be selected independently of a character's Role, allowing for multiple combinations of characters and thus more possible narratives. These elements – descriptive "properties" and reputation-building "methods" – still constitute abstraction in the way that the numerical values of *Dungeons and Dragons* do, they simply do so in a qualitative paradigm rather than a quantitative one.

In addition to the special descriptions of each individual role and background, characters in *Good Society* (like characters in Austen) are also defined by their "Desires," "Relationships," and "Connections," each of which are determined by cards drawn at the beginning of the game. Much like the qualitative information on the character sheets, "Desire" and "Relationship" cards aid players in understanding their character's role within the fictional world of the game using evocative descriptions and vaguely

Austenian scenarios (Figure 46, below). These "Desire" and "Relationship" cards are often familiar enough to evoke specific Austenian plots (the desire to "determine your love's true feelings and re-establish your engagement" echoes Darcy's goal towards the end of *Pride and Prejudice*), but vague enough to allow for a variety of narrative possibilities (the "Rival" card

defines a particular relationship but allows for any number of reasons behind the rivalry). These cards not only bind characters together within the world of the game, but also encourage them to interact in interesting ways as they pursue their goals and develop their relationships. In addition to a Desire and two Relationships, players are also



Figure 46 – A "Desire" card (front and back)

tasked with creating one or two minor characters called Connections, which will be controlled by other players throughout the course of the game (Figure 47). Rather than full-fledged characters, a character's Connections act as narrative tools for the other players, personas they may inhabit



Figure 47 – Two possible "Connections"

temporarily to infuse a scene with drama without directly involving their own major character. A player might embroil another player-character's "sister" Connection in a scandal, giving their own character a chance to resolve it, or they might conclude that another player-character's advances will invoke the wrath of their overbearing guardian.

Connections, like Desires and Relationships, combine with major characters in order to produce a complex system meant to facilitate a suitably dramatic experience of an Austen-esque narrative.

Even before taking into account *Good Society's* unique method of conflict resolution (to be discussed in the next subsection), the process of collaborative character creation already requires a fair amount of what Stanford economist Michael Suk-Young Chwe has described as an Austenian brand of strategic thinking. Although his 2013 book *Jane Austen, Game Theorist*⁴³ has been justifiably criticized for its often-strained attempts to establish a “consilience” between artistic endeavors and social-science methodologies (Deresiewicz 45), its central thesis – that Austen’s six novels can be productively read as texts that explicitly explore the concept of strategic thinking on theoretical as well as practical levels – still proves provocative, especially in the context of the choice-driven medium of games.⁴⁴ Rather than just serve as useful case studies for illustrating economic concepts like the effect of preferences on rational decision-making or one’s ability to predict the actions of others through cost/benefit analysis, Chwe claims that Austen’s books “[analyze] these foundational concepts in examples too numerous and systematic to be considered incidental” (1). Consider, for example, the centrality of the concept of choice, which “Austen’s heroines adamantly defend . . . against any presumption otherwise” (97). Even when a choice is considered lamentable – as is Charlotte Lucas’s choice to marry the boring Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* – Austen consistently and explicitly values the power of making reasoned and unencumbered choices (“Poor Charlotte!—it was melancholy to leave her to such society!—But she had chosen it with her eyes open” [Austen 146]). Similarly, Chwe also points out how Austen and her characters often explicitly operate in terms of commensurability, or the ability to weigh complex feelings against each other to determine the

greatest payoff. As Charlotte explains to Elizabeth regarding her choice of husband: “I am not romantic, you know; I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins’s character, connection, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state” (Austen 87). Of course, the choices and preferences of Austen’s heroines seldom lead to outcomes that are as conservative or calculated as Charlotte’s (there is a reason she is not the protagonist), but Austen’s emphasis on rational decision-making in these terms forms the basis of what Chwe calls “a theory of human behavior based upon strategic thinking,” which parallels and can inform modern theories of human behavior (Chwe 2).

For Chwe, Austen’s emphasis on choice and the rational weighing of preferences serves as a basis for her theorization of strategic thinking, or the ability of an individual to consistently and accurately take into account the possible actions of others before acting themselves (97). Austen herself refers to this capacity using terms like “penetration,” “foresight,” and “sagacity” throughout her novels, emphasizing its status as a simultaneously cognitive and imaginative ability that is important for navigating the social sphere (Chwe 107). In fact, Chwe spends a lengthy chapter framing Austen’s novels as “chronicles of how a young woman learns strategic thinking skills” that emphasize how “learning strategic thinking is part of becoming a grown woman” (49). Each novel presents this development in slightly different degrees: *Northanger Abbey*’s naïve Catherine Morland, for example, gradually learns to navigate the social sphere by evaluating and re-evaluating the actions of her peers (Chwe 67) and the humbling of the titular character in *Emma* acts as “a corrective for those impressed by their own abilities” (Chwe 86). No matter how strategic the protagonist begins at the start, each novel abounds with “schemes,” “maneuvers,” and “calculations” that are not altogether negatively connoted, as they are either

the result of or the test for the protagonist's strategic capacity. Chwe points out that "all six novels are set in motion by some sort of strategic manipulation" – whether that is Jane Bennet's trip to a suitor's house right before a forecasted rainstorm or Emma's own matchmaking between Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston (183) – and frequently end with a scene with the lovers "explaining to [their] partner [their] motivations and choices" cementing their intimacy through "strategizing in retrospect" (Chwe 6). It is this sort of excess of strategic explanation in Austen's work that marks work as being largely interested in choice, preferences, and strategic thinking.

While Austen's work may not initially seem to be the same "reductive and technical" notion of strategic thinking that came "out of a Cold War military-industrial 'think-tank'" (or, for that matter, mid-century wargaming and the TTRPGs that came out of it), Chwe reveals that her work actually contributes significant innovations to modern theories of strategic thinking (2). Chief among these, for Chwe, is Austen's understanding of "cluelessness," or the reasons why some people fail to think strategically. Often, this is because high-status characters fail to see other, lower-status as active agents who can think for themselves: in the words of Austen's Emma Woodhouse, "it is always incomprehensible to a man that a woman should ever refuse an offer of marriage. A man always imagines a woman to be ready for anybody who asks her" (*Emma* 64). Aside from this, though, Chwe claims that Austen's works reveal aspects of strategic thinking that are often overlooked by those who study it, including how jointly working together to manipulate or monitor a third person (as Elizabeth and Darcy do in bringing another Jane and Mr. Bingley together) can build intimacy, how self-management involves anticipating one's own actions (as how Jane attempts to keep herself away from Bingley after being heartbroken), how preferences can rationally change over time (as Elizabeth's do for Darcy), and how the act of

maintaining a relationship is an active and strategic process rather than a passive one (as illustrated by Darcy's efforts after his first proposal fails) (6).⁴⁵

With the notion of Austen as a theorist of strategic thinking in mind, *Good Society's* heritage in simulationist TTRPGs and military war-games actually resonates with its source texts in ways that are not immediately apparent. In eschewing combat mechanics and dice rolls, *Good Society* has not shed its strategic roots, but adapted the mechanics of the genre to fit the social strategizing of Austen's works. The act of creating characters based on abstractions of Austenian archetypes – each with their own features and abilities – and putting them into high-stakes social scenarios *is* strategic in the Austenian sense. As a player, one must anticipate how their major character and minor connections might reasonably react in order to set up a sufficiently dramatic scenario within the world. But as this is a collaborative storytelling game, they must also take into account the possible actions of their fellow players and the characters they are controlling. The action of any character within this web of Desires, Relationships, and Connections involves an understanding of what the acting character's goals might be, how this action might open up opportunities for other characters to act, and whether or not the controlling player will accept this change in the first place.

Not only do gameplay choices involve the sort of strategic scheming and meddling performed by Austen's characters, but it also illustrates many of Austen's "innovations" according to Chwe. In working together to manipulate other (fictional) persons, players of *Good Society* are embodying the principle of strategic partnerships creating intimacy in Austen's characters. Further, the act of having to anticipate the actions and desires of a fictional character alongside their own desires as a player mirrors the notion of self-management as the management of selves that Chwe sees in Austenian characters like *Persuasion's* Anne Elliot

(153). The knowledge differential between a player and the characters they control (especially the minor Connections) may also serve as an exploration of Austenian cluelessness as well, as players attempt to justify why a certain character would not act in a strategic manner. The Desire cards and Inner Conflict section of the character sheet encourage considerations of constancy and preference changes, respectively, as the changing reputations and fortunes within a heavily structured gameplay session are tempered by the drive towards a singular goal for each character. The emphasis on action and choice within this collaborative storytelling space, especially when placed in relation with the game's Austenian source texts, reveals strategic thinking to be a key element of both systems.

Deviation 3: Resolve Tokens and the Pursuit of the Possible

How one goes about navigating these dramatic scenarios in *Good Society* – that is, how the game abstracts the process of Austenian characters getting into conflicts and overcoming obstacles – is its third major deviation from the traditional TTRPG model, and one which resonates with Austen's own allegiance to the generative potentials of the possible over the foreclosure of the probable. In traditional TTRPGs, players who want their characters to accomplish something must roll dice (usually a single twenty-sided die in contemporary TTRPGs) in order to see if they are successful. The outcome of the roll is not entirely random, however: the player adds bonuses to the roll based upon their character's skill in the task (represented numerically on their character sheet), special items they have equipped, and other conditions that may help or hinder their character's ability to complete their stated goal. Moreover, the number they have to beat is usually determined before the roll takes place. When the GM announces that the adventuring party's horse-drawn wagon begins careening out of

control, for example, a player may declare they want their rather strong character to grab the reins and force the horses to a stop. The GM might set a relatively high target number of 15 to represent the difficulty of the task, and the player would roll a twenty-sided die and add their character's strength modifier (+3) to the result. If this total is above 15, then the player succeeds and stops the cart; if the total is less than the target number of 15, then they make a mistake and suffer the consequences. The nature of these consequences, just like the target number, is largely up to the GM's discretion, who could inflict anything on the character from a minor bruise to a broken neck depending on the narrative context and their own inclinations. As such, the player's ability to succeed or fail in such a system becomes a matter of calculating probabilities, optimizing their character's statistics, and gambling with their agency over the narrative world.

The designers of *Good Society*, however, opted to replace dice-rolling with a much less random method: Resolve Tokens. Each player is allotted two tokens per character and Connection they control representing these characters' "determination to pursue their goals" (69). Whenever a player wishes for any given character or Connection (including theirs) to do or know something particularly unlikely, significant to the story, or harmful to another character or Connection, they must declare their intent and relinquish a Resolve Token. If this would directly harm, alter, or interfere with another player's character, they must give their token to that player, essentially incentivizing players to accept misfortunes as resolve tokens are relatively scarce. In the spirit of collaborative storytelling, of course, all players involved must agree on how the action will play out before the token is accepted, meaning that either player has the ability to negotiate the terms of this change to the story before it takes place or simply refuse the change outright. By the rules of *Good Society*, the "runaway carriage" scenario described in the paragraph above could be initiated not by the GM, but by another player who wants some

dramatic misfortune to befall their character's rival. The player controlling the carriage's passenger might choose to accept the token on the condition that although their character is injured during the crash, their valiant attempt to save the other passengers has bolstered his reputation among the gentry. As opposed to the unpredictable outcomes of *Dungeons and Dragons*' modified dice-rolling, the Resolve Token mechanic makes achieving one's goals in the game a matter of carefully selecting which events to effect, thinking of interesting outcomes, and learning to creatively compromise with other players in the name of dramatic storytelling.

Aside from highlighting the strong wills of many of Austen's heroines and emphasizing the democratization of narrative control established by *Good Society*'s other deviations, the use of Resolve Tokens also resonates with Austen's relationship to the concepts of the probable and the possible in all of her novels. In *The Historical Austen*, William Galperin argues that one of the things that makes Jane Austen so unique as a writer was not her proto-realist tendencies (a view he claims has been "grossly exaggerated" [6]), but the way in which she "presents a version of the real that, as many of her earliest readers understood, is effective because it eschews, in one way or another, the regulatory strategies that seek to cut reality down to size" (46). As opposed to the picturesque "fictions of the probable" of her day – conservative stories which ultimately implored their readers to "consent to living within their means" by presenting "reasonable" (i.e. diminished) expectations of courtship and marriage – Austen's novels align themselves with the exploration of the possible while under the guise of a rational, restrictive, and conventional social order (89, 94). Rather than act in a purely oppositional manner by indulging in the romantic or unreal, Galperin claims that "it was Austen's purpose to work the peculiar interface of probability and possibility, or what to her bemused readers seemed an uncanny amalgam of familiarity and strangeness" (61), usually through the ironic lilt of her narrator's observations,

excessive descriptions of seemingly unimportant characters, and her allowance for “the irruption of ‘novelty’ amid the probable or ‘everyday’ (95). This is why the endings of her marriage plots are (as Galperin puts it) “remarkable indifferent or perfunctory” compared to the excessive details of her character descriptions and narration: her novels are far more interested in lingering on the possibilities afforded to independent, unmarried youth than the calculated likelihood of securing a spouse (96).

Perhaps the best example of Austen’s interest in subtly presenting her readers with what Galperin calls a “horizon of possibility” (96) can be found within *Pride and Prejudice*’s famous opening line: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” (Austen 1). Although the language Austen uses here bears all the certainty of a maxim (“truth,” “universal,” “must”), using such strong terms to defend an apparently obvious notion raises the possibility that such a “truth” could be *unacknowledged*. As Galperin puts it, “the mere fact that this truth must also be universally acknowledged, that it cannot stand alone without the continuous prop of opinion, custom, and fantasy, raises another possibility, which all the weight of coercion and probability cannot suppress:” namely, that there exists a world in which men and women are not compelled by Regency society’s conception of marriage (126). Austen’s first line is not necessarily espousing or endorsing such a radical view, of course – as Galperin notes, the statement changes from an “unstable observation with intimations of possibility to the more stable irony characteristic of an authoritative narrator” rather quickly in the sentences that follow it (126) – but such a certainty is not the point. Instead, the value of stating what would otherwise be left unsaid in a more conservative, probabilistic fiction lies in its rhetorical invitation to contemplate alternative possibilities rather than a single

outcome, to linger in “a world of possibility [which] shadows the probable and representable world” and which is pleasurable to explore in and of itself (126).

Especially when compared with the dice rolls of traditional TTRPGs, *Good Society*’s token-based conflict resolution mechanics resonate with Austen’s methods for engendering these contemplations of possibility. On the surface, putting conflict resolution into the hands of players through discrete tokens rather than random dice rolls may seem to support the constraints of probability over free and open possibility. *Good Society*’s rulebook states that “players may not shape the story outside of the boundaries agreed upon during Collaboration,” which includes considering the game’s tone, historical realism, and other such factors established at the start of the game (71). This, in theory, keeps the outcome of the story more in line with what would most likely occur in the source texts according to the players’ understanding of social, political, and genre conventions associated with Regency-era literature, whereas the random aspects of dice-rolling could hypothetically produce less predictable outcomes. Simultaneously, however, using the Resolve Token mechanic instead of rolling dice changes what was essentially a binary decision based on the numerical calculation of risk (high roll succeeds, low roll fails) into an opportunity to explore limitless possibilities through player negotiation. Especially when considering that the consequences for failure in traditional TTRPGs is largely determined by the GM and not the player, dice rolling mechanics essentially ascribe to the same sort of “tautology of fear” that fictions of probability do: they encourage users to focus on how to reduce the likelihood of failure rather than the many possibilities of success (94). *Good Society*’s Resolve Tokens, in contrast, mirror Austen’s stylistic excesses by forcing players to linger in the “world of possibility” rather than focus on progressing through the game’s rigid and predictable structure (126). While the final outcome of any decision in *Good Society* may therefore be as

pre-ordained as a marriage at the end of any Austen novel, the process of reaching that outcome necessarily involves an engagement with the possibilities that do not come to pass. The pleasure of pondering the effects of what *could* happen both to the characters and the world in which they live (often at the expense of smooth plot progression) is exactly the kind of Austenism that Galperin discusses.

Of course, the point of presenting these possibilities – in both *Good Society* and Galperin's reading of Austen – is not to facilitate some unfeeling, actuarial calculation of a mathematically sublime number of gameplay or plot outcomes (respectively); it is to leverage the user's experience with these possibilities to produce affective (and sometimes politically oppositional) responses when they were compared to the historical present. For Galperin, there is a certain melancholic affect to watching the probable foreclose upon the possible towards the ends of Austen's works (especially her early work), as "it is to the history of opportunities *missed*, rather than possibilities necessarily abroad, that reading Austen in a certain way refers and – in a more nostalgic register – manages to recapitulate" (124). At the same time, her irony and stylistic excesses (especially in her later novels) also explored the positive affects that accompanied the expansion of the probable to include more possibilities, the notion that the prevailing order of narrative "is scarcely all we need to know or that that there *has been* to appreciate and to honor" (153). Both of these affective dynamics arise from not from being lost in the "realistic" and didactic narrative frameworks which her texts might contain (something Galperin might call a "conversion of history into story"), but from "the emptying of story *into history*, or into a review of the actual, where retrospection and [a] horizon of possibility are largely interdependent" (25). In other words, Austen's representations of the struggle between the ever-foreclosing probable and the expansive possible succeeds in "giving readers with no

particular stake in resistance. . . an occasion to pause,” to recognize within their historical reality the same melancholy and potential for change embodied by the struggles for possibility in Austen’s particularly ironic and “diverting” texts (34).

Galperin’s historicist project limits its reading of the political potentials of Austen’s play with possibilities to “such change as Austen *could* imagine, or that her equally privileged readership could somehow fathom in reading her” (162). This could include her “belief in the significance of individual lives and in the peculiar dynamism of everyday life” over and against the social didacticism of plot-driven “fictions of probability” (162) could prompt her readers (especially her fellow women) to look at their world as one that could “benefit from transformations that. . . are or *were* conceivable” within the means of her day (158). *Good Society*, however, is bound by no such limitations, and yet it encourages the same “review of the actual” through its mechanics (34). Among the questions the players must answer during the “Collaboration” phase discussed in previous sections, for example, is “How will we treat the gender power balance?” (Gordon 34). In addition to the “Historical” option (“Standard Regency patriarchy”), the game makes explicit two other possibilities: “Off,” in which “it is normal and respectable for people of all genders to. . . have significant and respectable careers, make the first move, inherit entailed estates, have marital relationships with all genders;” and “In Reverse,” in which the aforementioned social conventions only apply to women (34). While the radical implications of these options exceed Austen’s historical imagining of the possible, the explicit mention of them here opens up a reading of the historical past and present against these possibilities in a distinctly Austenian fashion. Further, it forces a dynamic in which even players who advocate for the “Historical” option must consider *why* they choose to do so, thus “giving readers with no particular stake in resistance. . . an occasion to pause” and reflect upon a

politically and textually important detail that seemed insignificant before alternative possibilities were presented to them (Galperin 34).

An even more compelling example of the game taking Austen's political and affective portrayal of the struggle between the probable and the possible can be found in a small green box on the same page titled "What about Race?":

Gender is a central theme in Austen's work, so it's important to discuss your group's approach to the gender power balance. Race is not. Austen's work is not about race, and doesn't grapple with racial prejudice. For this reason, we take the approach that in the world of *Good Society*, racial prejudice does not exist, and characters may be of whatever race they choose without incident (Gordon 34).

This approach to character race – which the ethnically diverse array of characters depicted in the rulebook's illustrations and on the included "Connection" cards makes practically unavoidable – does more than inspire a "review of the actual, where retrospection and a horizon of possibility are largely interdependent" that Galperin claims Austen is able to do (Galperin 34). Instead, by excluding the option to play in a "historically accurate" (i.e. racist) gameworld from the "Collaboration" phase (both mechanically and, via the green box, graphically), the game's designers are in fact striking a blow against the probable in a way Austen never could have. While this move technically forecloses on what is narratively possible within their game system, it does so at the *expense* of historical probability rather than its benefit, requiring its players to imaginatively inhabit a world in which the pernicious ideology of racism does not (in fact, cannot) exist. Reflecting upon these possibilities invites players to consider (somewhat mournfully and somewhat excitedly) the "opportunities *missed*" within the conditions of their historical past, present, and future, but also those opportunities missed by other TTRPGs which use "race" as a mechanically significant measure of character capabilities (Galperin 124). Although *Good Society's* take on race thus extends beyond Austen's exploration of the dynamic

between the probable and the possible or her historically-specific opposition to the artistic and social trends that foreclosed the possible, it proves to be performing many of the same Austenian moves.

Conclusion: Collaborative Possibilities

Perhaps more so than Chwe's take on Austen as a strategic thinker and Goode's discussions of her as a narrative designer, *Good Society*'s approach to abstracting Austen shares an overall resonance with Galperin's notion of Austen as one who is interested in exploring the dynamics wherein the probable struggles to foreclose the possible. The entirety of *Good Society*'s design – from its integration of collaborative storytelling into the very structure of the game to the way it models characters as complex interconnected entities to its resolve-token mechanic – seems to be aimed at encouraging its users to explore and express the narrative possibilities of Austen's storyworlds rather than “faithfully” recreating a particular Austenian plot. In fact, by representing Austen's oeuvre as a system of free-floating and operable abstractions of her characters and plot structure, *Good Society* as written remains a space of pure possibility with which players must engage before ever taking their first turns. The depth of these resonances with Austen only truly become apparent when the game is read alongside the genre of TTRPGs from which it deviates. The game's resonances with Austen's structure and narrative designs are foregrounded when compared to the freeform adventures of other TTRPGs; the absence of tactical combat in a genre that is based on it makes us consider the strategic implications of Austen's original work; and the conspicuous lack of dice-rolling mechanics leads us to question the purpose behind the game's Resolve Token mechanic. It is the experience that arises from the interactions of this tripartite intertextual system created between three

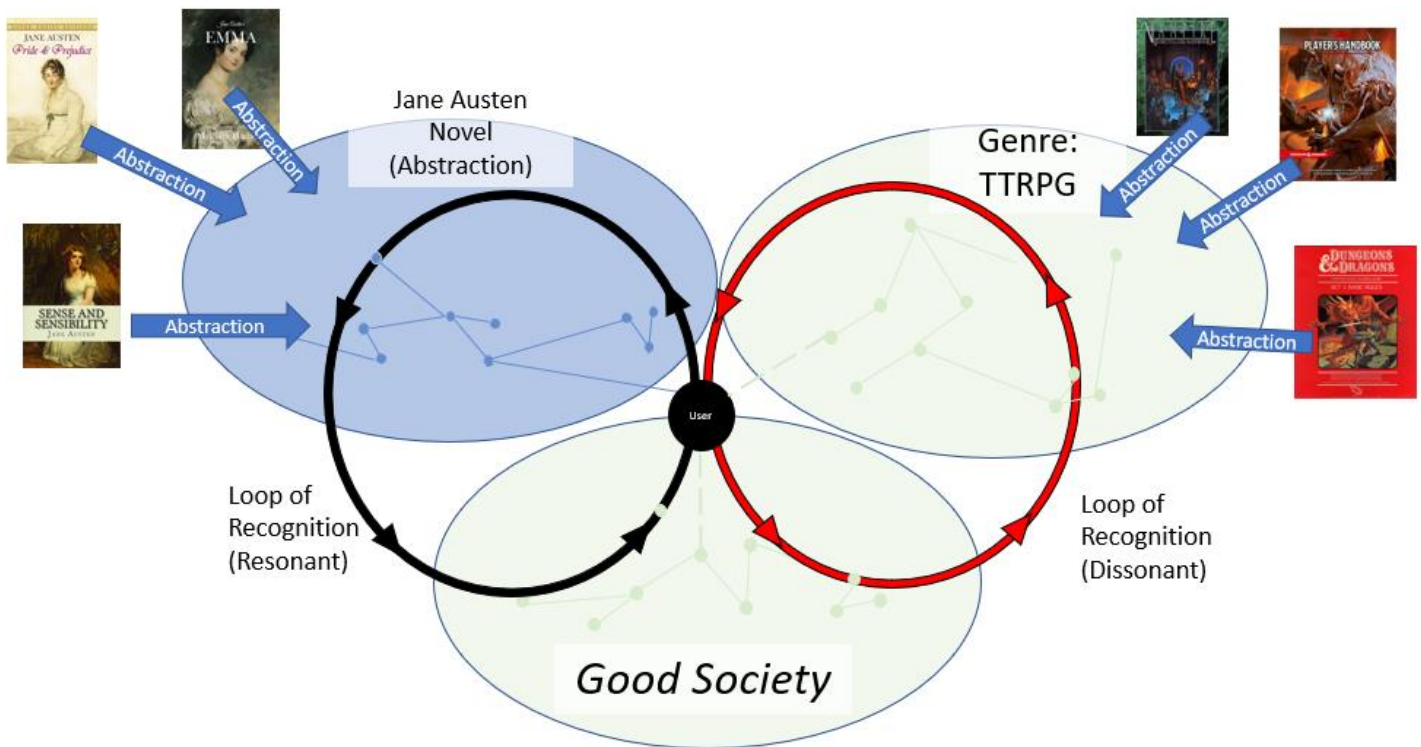


Figure 48 – An intertextual system consisting of *Good Society*, Jane Austen's novels, and the TTRPG genre abstractions – the user's model of Austen's oeuvre, the user's model of a TTRPG, and *Good Society*, a designer's model of both – that has the potential to grant all three with new meaning (Figure 48).

Understanding game adaptations like *Good Society* in terms of abstraction – the creation of a playable model rather than the re-creation of a narrative text – has theoretical and practical benefits over traditional models of abstraction. On a theoretical level, it presents a framework and vocabulary for examining diverse intertextual objects via a similar paradigm. As revealed by this chapter's discussion of *Pride and Prejudice* adaptations and the history of the TTRPG genre, both adaptation and genre formation (not to mention similar intertextual transformations) can be usefully conceived of as involving the abstraction of elements from a body of sources; the only difference is whereas those who create adaptations and works in a genre go on to instantiate these abstractions into new versions of the source, TTRPGs present a system that players may use to make their own instances of these textual elements. Thus, thinking of such texts not as

wholesale conversions of a text into a new medium which are beholden to a specific “original” (as fidelity critics might put it) but as collections of narrative elements instantiated and altered from the abstractions of users allows for ways of tracking resonances between particular adaptations without necessitating a “true” version of any text. On the practical level, the notion of abstraction allows readings of artifacts like *Good Society* which might not fit classical notions of adaptation but which nonetheless afford their users new and interesting ways of understanding, reinterpreting, and playing with texts.

Game adaptations, by virtue of needing to abstract narrative elements such that they are meaningful in interactive systems, provide useful case studies for examining these issues. The concept of abstraction not only makes the reading of *Good Society* provided here possible, but also encourages scholars to pay attention to design rather than plot or aesthetics alone. The point of creating a world, populating it with characters, and selecting the verbal, visual, and/or aural style with which to present it is to create an experience for the reader, one which they can inhabit and possibly change through their choices. This is what makes games based on literary works so useful to adaptation scholarship and textual studies as a whole: they encourage scholars to think of texts as designed narrative experiences made up of interacting elements (characters, prose, material components, etc.) rather than an indivisible plot or material artifact alone. The sequence of events that are chronicled in any piece of fiction, under this paradigm, are only one possible outcome of a complex system of characters, motivations, and happenstances that could have easily turned out differently. Such a view highlights the inherent malleability of texts, which in turn allows us to consider the fictional and historical contingencies on which these tales depend, value the craft behind even the most seemingly arbitrary of writing choices and encourage new interpretations of familiar stories.

Conclusion:

Immersion, Play, and the Centrality of the User

Children, who play life, discern its true law and relations more clearly than men, who fail to live it worthily, but who think that they are wiser by experience, that is, by failure.

-Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (69)

As the previous chapters of this dissertation have aimed to show, an adaptation's meaning does not arise merely from its internal parts, but from the larger intertextual systems with which it intersects and the contexts in which it is situated. The pleasure of treating an adaptation *as an adaptation* (to once again borrow adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon's useful phrasing) arises from the repeated act of recognizing it in relation to source texts, whether that source is a particular version of a single work (as in the Hamlet-inspired gamebook *To Be or Not To Be*), a particular moment or character's perspective within a source text (as in Beam Software's *The Hobbit*, which approaches its source in the same way its clever protagonist approaches a riddle contest), or a constellation of texts that form a canonical or generic corpus (as in *Good Society*'s ability to mash up characters and events from across Jane Austen's oeuvre through abstraction). It is from the dynamic system of interactions between adaptations and their source texts that meaning arises, not from any individual element within that system. But in order for these systems to be activated – in order for the loop of recognition to be engaged and these connections to be drawn across these multiple texts – the system requires a central node, a relay through which all textual information, literary abstractions, and relevant contexts and intertexts are channeled. The linchpin of this intertextual system is the user, the person actually engaging with the adaptation.

The role of the user (also known as the reader, viewer, or player) in the systems approach to adaptation has been discussed in some form or another across the previous chapters. When introducing the systems approach in the first chapter, I identified the role of an active user as being a core similarity between games, adaptations, and user-oriented systems in general; in the chapter on Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, I showed how the interaction between a user's agency and their knowledge of the source text within a gameplay context can affect their interpretation of both game adaptations and their sources; in the chapter on game adaptations of Jane Austen's work, I discussed how the user's relationship to the characters they control and their abstractions of Austen's worlds can serve as fodder for creative and strategic engagement with an adaptation. But while each of these chapters has focused on the user's role in various capacities – the user as connecting node in a system, user as player-protagonist, user as fan/co-creator – none has delved deeply into the perspective of the user as an individual: as a thinking, feeling human being who spatially and temporally inhabits the “real” world even as they engage with these textual systems. While the relationship between any given user's lived experience in the world and their experience of a text is not easy to define or measure, it is undeniable that both experiences are as intimately connected as a source and its adaptation. In an attempt to open up the systems approach to its greatest breadth, this concluding section of my dissertation will present a reading of a game that encourages its users to contemplate the connection between the text, the world, and their own inner lives: USC Game Innovation Lab's *Walden, a game* (2017).

As a first-person, realistically rendered adaptation of Henry David Thoreau's 1854 transcendentalist reflection on nature, *Walden, a game* was met with a fair amount of skepticism and derision leading up to its release. When *TIME* magazine first got wind of the decade-long project after it procured a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 2012, it

mockingly encouraged its readers to “get ready for some edge-of-your-seat 19th century transcendentalist action!” and highlighted the absurdity of “a video game about a 19th-century philosopher living in a shack, where there’s only one character and nothing happens” (Hayden). The dissonance between typical video game tropes and Thoreau’s work became a central part of the media buzz surrounding the game’s release, resulting in articles with titles like “Walden, the anti-video game video game” (Allan), “Grand Theft Auto generation slows down” (Macintyre), and “Thoreau’s classic work ‘Walden’ gets the video game treatment – yes, you heard that right” (Smith). The “world’s most improbable video game” (as a 2017 article in *Smithsonian Magazine* deemed it [Peterson]) was also met with skepticism from some of those invested in Thoreau’s oeuvre. Richard Higgins, author of *Thoreau and the Language of Trees*, was quoted in a *New York Times* article as writing off the project, telling potential players to “go out and see [their] own backyard” instead (Pogrebin). Even favorable reviews of the game like that of NPR’s Jason Sheehan had to wrestle with the fact that the transcendentalist author of the game’s source text “would’ve hated it thoroughly and completely” (Sheehan) just as he hated many of the technologies of his day and the “lives of quiet desperation” to which such technologies contributed (Thoreau 8). In fact, one of the explicitly stated ideologies behind Thoreau’s experiment is that one “should not *play* life, or *study* it merely, while the community supports them at this expensive game, but earnestly *live* it from beginning to end” – a quote that, while originally about a practical education, seems damning for a project as seemingly blasphemous as a game adaptation of his famous book (Thoreau 38).

What we see in discourse like this is not merely the appeal to fidelity that has plagued adaptation studies since its inception, but also a distrust of games as a medium capable of expressing literary ideas. Inherent in both the incredulous tone of popular press articles

comparing the project to action games like *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar Games 1997) and Higgins' dismissive suggestion to "just go outside" is the idea that games immerse their players in false realities, realities which use gameplay mechanics to distract those immersed within them from the world at large. Such a view not only ignores the diversity of game forms and approaches to them explored in previous chapters, but also largely misses the point of how game adaptations operate. *Walden, a game* is not a replacement for contemplating the natural world or Thoreau's thoughts on it, just as adaptations more generally are not replacements for their source material. Instead, *Walden, a game* – like all game adaptations – effectively expands the systems in which both the source text and its adaptation are situated, bridging the gap between the text, its intertexts, its contexts, and even the personal experiences of its users in order to allow new, meaningful experiences to emerge from their interaction. While this kind of process is potentially at work in any adaptation, *Walden, a game* presents an excellent final case study to explore the systems approach to adaptation because its immersive aesthetics and minimalist gameplay make the user's role in this interpretative process explicit. With this in mind, I will engage in a close-reading of *Walden, a game* and discuss how its design works to elaborate upon the philosophy contained in Thoreau's *Walden* by creating an immersive, mechanically minimalist virtual environment which encourages users to explore both Thoreau and their own reactions to him. As I aim to show, it is the play between these elements – catalyzed by the user's own play within the textual system – that make game adaptations interpretatively generative textual objects.

Immersive Aesthetics and the World of *Walden*

The opening cutscene of *Walden, a game* begins with a shot of the digitally-rendered shallows of a virtual Walden Pond, the glare of an artificial sun reflecting off of the surface of

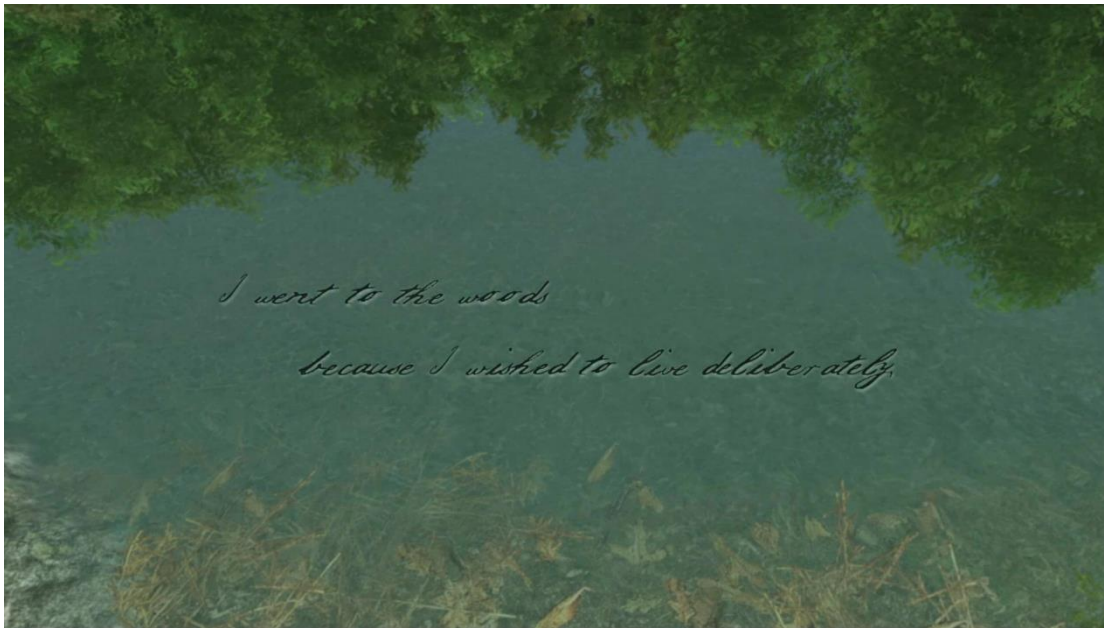


Figure 49 – Reading *Walden* on the pond's surface

the water. The game's musical theme – an orchestral arrangement composed of elongated string notes punctuated by bounding pizzicato and tapping percussion – slowly becomes louder as the virtual camera pans slightly upward to reveal a reflection of trees on the opposite shore. After a moment, words written in a cursive script begin to appear in the blue space between the crown of trees and the reeds of the lakebed as if rising from the water (Figure 49). A disembodied male voice (that of Emile Hirsch, who voices Thoreau within the game and notably also played the existentialist protagonist of Sean Penn's 2007 film *Into the Wild*) reads these words aloud. The narrated passage is easily recognizable to any who are familiar with Thoreau's *Walden*:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and to give a true account of it.

Although the player is unable to interact with the gameworld during this cutscene, they can hear and see that nature is very much alive. Birdsong and other ambient sounds play alongside the musical score, and a fish can be seen snaking among the reeds of the lake as seasons cycle from



Figure 50 – Pre-rendered cutscene (left) versus game world (right)

summer, to autumn, to winter, and to spring. As the voiceover finishes its final line, the screen transitions to a view of an uncompleted cabin among green New England foliage, slightly undulating as if it is still being reflected on the surface of the pond. Eventually this movement settles as the game subtly transitions from the pre-rendered opening cutscene to the slightly more rigid geometry of the game world, signifying that the player is now able to move around the scene (Figure 50). It is as if the player has broken through the surface on which Thoreau's words are projected and plunged into the depths of the text, now able to fully experience the world that has been refracted through time and the author's attempts to put it into words.

In introducing the player to the game world in this way, *Walden*, a game's opening cutscene visually embodies the concept of "immersion" as discussed by Janet Murray in her 1997 book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. Murray describes this user-centric phenomenon as one of the core storytelling affordances of the computer, the innately pleasurable sense of "being transported to an elaborately simulated place" in which "we can act out our fantasies" (124). She describes this sensation using explicitly aquatic metaphors:

We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus. We enjoy the movement out of our familiar world, the feeling of alertness that comes from being in a new place, and the delight that comes from learning to move within it. Immersion can entail a mere flooding of the mind

with sensation. . . a pleasurable drowning out of the verbal parts of the brain. But in a participatory medium, immersion implies learning to swim, to do the things the new environment makes possible” (124-125)

Murray goes on to describe immersion as a temporary, elusive state, one that is achieved through specific stylistic or formal means meant to engage the player and prop up the illusion of entering such a world. While the mechanical, technological, and artistic elements which make a game “immersive” for a particular player will vary, Murray presents specific techniques that aid in immersion (at least for primarily narrative experiences like *Walden, a game*). These include limiting the level of user interaction (127), using narrative to structure participation as a visit (152), and limiting moments of frustration or arousal to ensure that the player retains their focus on the game itself (146), all of which *Walden, a game* achieves through its mechanical minimalism (discussed more in the next section).

Although Murray is far from the only scholar to discuss immersion (indeed, such an overview is beyond the reach of this conclusion), I use her theorization here for two reasons.⁴⁶ The first is that, despite what her book’s title *Hamlet on the Holodeck* may imply, her definition of immersion does not necessarily depend upon on a work’s audio-visual fidelity to reality. Though she does write that “as an aesthetic value. . . immersion requires consistency and detail” (157), most of the projects she discusses – such as text-based “multi-user dungeons” and a few *Star Trek* CD-ROM games – are immersive despite the “unspectacular screen graphics” of the late 1990s (138). This is because, for her, it is the user’s ability to “swim, to do the things the new environment makes possible” which gives rise to the phenomenon (125). Contrast this with the sense of immersion implied by those like adaptation scholar Linda Hutcheon as mentioned in this project’s introduction:

what is often most significant for videogames is the adapted heterocosm, the spectacular world of digital animation the player enters. Our visceral responses to the immersive

experience of both the visual and the audio effects (sound and music) create an ‘intensity of engagement’. . . unrivaled in most other media (Hutcheon 51).

As the discussions of gamebooks, text adventures, and tabletop roleplaying games in this project’s previous chapters have shown, emphasizing sensory immersion and the visual construction of virtual environments as being hallmarks of the “participatory mode” can cause scholars to overlook the ways in which non-visual and non-digital game genres can reinterpret, critique, or otherwise adapt texts in compelling ways. That said, Hutcheon is correct in identifying audio-visual immersion as a key appeal of many games and game adaptations; Murray’s own frequent references to the *Star Trek*-style “holodeck” suggest that her interaction-focused view of immersion is at the very least compatible with purely audio-visual understandings of the term. However, Murray’s theorization ultimately posits that what is important about “immersive” audio and visual techniques in the context of game adaptations is not necessarily the absorptive “intensity of engagement” championed by Hutcheon and others – as I discuss in the next section, *Walden, a game* tends to push *against* this common experiential tendency – but the way in which such effects allow for new interpretations and experiences to arise when they interact with other elements in the game (and, as we shall see, textual) system.

The second reason Murray’s theorization of immersion is useful to understand game adaptations through the lens of a systems approach is the active role in which she positions the user. Rather than describe immersion in terms of the common Coleridgian phrase “suspension of disbelief” – a phrase which connotes a certain absorptive loss of faculties and reinforces a negative view of digital games as mindless entertainment – Murray points out that immersion in a virtual world involves what she calls “the active creation of belief” (136). This reframing of immersion as a consciously achieved state not only grants more agency to the user of any given text in the manner of modern reader-response theory, but also emphasizes that “we bring our

own cognitive, cultural, and psychological templates to every story as we assess the characters and anticipate the ways the story is likely to go” (137). Murray even goes as far to say that “we can reinforce our belief by writing scholarly analyses or fanzine articles that analyze the underlying assumptions of the world,” giving users a stronger sense of immersion through their participation in extra-textual activities and their ability to forge connections between a single text and its intertexts and contexts (137). In other words, contrary to the sort of mindless, escapist isolation the prospect of a text “taking over our whole perceptual apparatus” or “flooding the mind with sensation” might have (124-125), Murray’s conception of an “active creation of belief” privileges both the player’s role in creating their own immersive experience as well as the myriad of other extratextual elements and practices that could potentially play a part in facilitating such an experience. To put it in terms of the systems approach, Murray’s theorization positions the user as being immersed not in a single virtual *world* separate from both the real world and the source text (Figure 51a), but within the *system of experience* that includes this game world as well as the formal, intertextual, and contextual elements with which this world interacts (Figure 51b). Immersion, in this sense, is much more interpretatively generative than a simple “game as world” model might suggest.

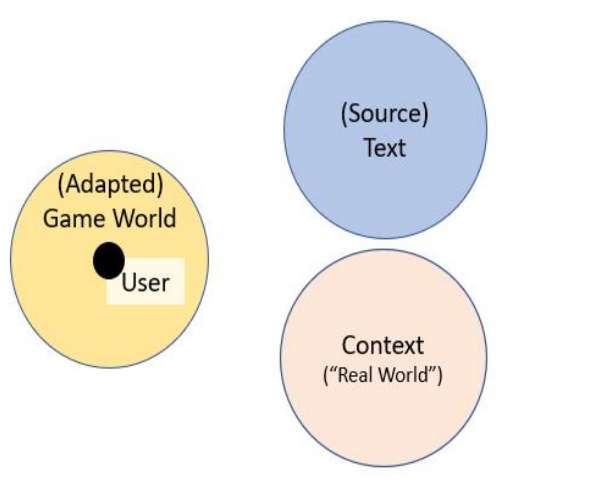


Figure 51a – Immersion within a game world

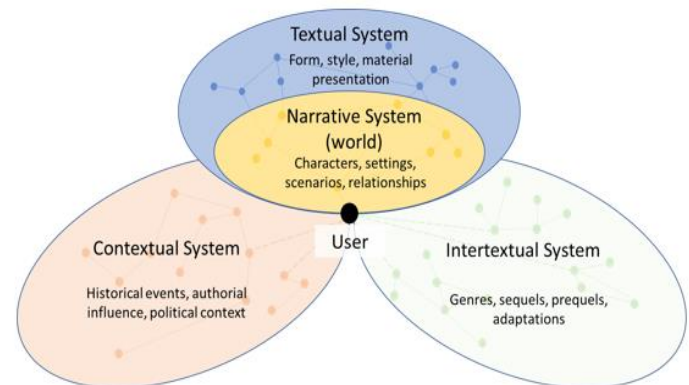


Figure 51b – Immersion within a system of experience

In order to understand the conception of immersion as an active engagement with a system rather than a passive entrapment in a world, we can examine how the audio-visually vivid space of Walden Pond functions in the intertextual system that is *Walden, a game* read as an adaptation of Thoreau's *Walden*. The game map itself covers roughly a few square miles of Walden Pond as it existed in Thoreau's day, using his own survey maps as reference ("Behind the Scenes of Walden, a game"). While some activities are limited to certain locations – for example, one can only fish at specified fishing holes, embark from specific boat launches, or hoe and weed in a pre-determined bean field – players are generally able to wander freely across this region without fear of running into invisible barriers or other nondiegetic game elements. The landscape is populated with over one thousand individually-rendered trees and shrubs, each of which are modelled and textured based on actual species in the area during Thoreau's day ("Behind the Scenes"). Holding down the right mouse-button while looking at any of them will bring up a small informational window (designed to look like a journal page) which gives not only the plant's scientific classification, but also a quote from *Walden* pertaining to that

particular variety of plant (Figure 52). The fauna are similarly well-researched: while some animal encounters will only trigger under certain conditions, the player can expect to stumble upon digital hares, frogs, owls, and other creatures as they wander through the woods, each of which will flee

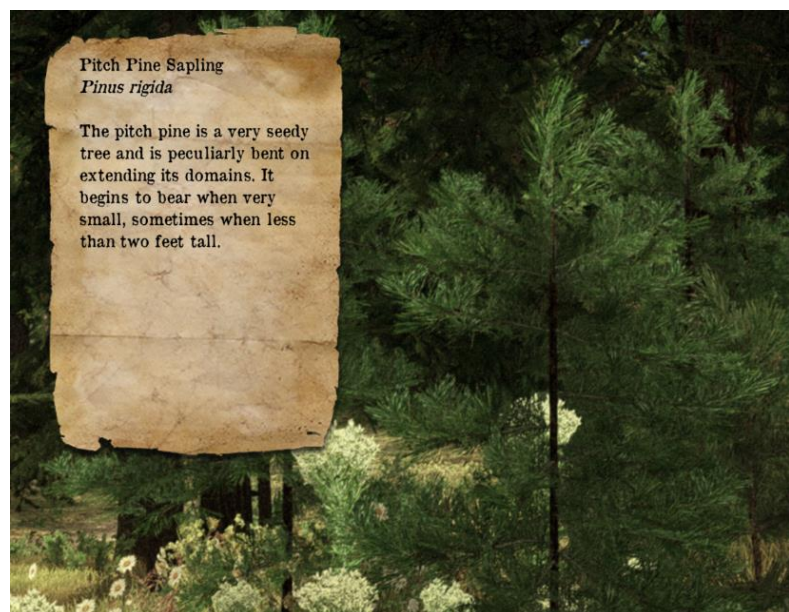


Figure 52 – Inspecting a Pitch Pine Sapling (*pinus rigida*)

if the player gets too close. The game even utilizes recordings of actual birdsong collected from the modern Walden Pond during different times of the day and year, resulting in an accurate and ever-changing ambiance that accompanies the player's exploration ("Behind the Scenes").

Alongside the game's rendering of shadows, reflections, and the bob and sway of the virtual camera as they "walk" (which encourages players to see themselves as inhabiting a physical, able subject within the virtual world), these aesthetic touches help contribute to a rather accurate simulacrum of the place in and about which Thoreau's text was written.

At first glance, the immersive audio-visual techniques of *Walden, a game* seem to be aimed at presenting a passive sense of immersion within a world rather than an active immersion within an intertextual system. But, when considered in interaction with its literary and physical source(s), the vivid audio-visual rendering of Walden Pond in *Walden, a game* calls attention to the way in which the natural world is always already mediated in both Thoreau's book and the physical place in which it was conceived. While the game spends a great deal of time trying to immerse the player in the physical reality of Walden Pond by vividly presenting its flora, fauna, and beautiful scenery, the opening chapters of Thoreau's text do quite the opposite. This is perhaps best reflected by the fact that the sentiment that opens *Walden, a game* ("I went to the woods...") is not actually the passage that opens *Walden* the book; while Thoreau's oft-quoted resolution to "live deliberately" has become a metonym for his entire project within popular discourse, his actual book begins with a rather frank discussion of the ideas behind his own work, when it was written, and who it was written for. "When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them," he begins, "I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only" (5). Although this does give his readers specific

pieces of background information regarding where his experiment takes place, it does little to invoke a sense of presence within the woods as the opening of *Walden, a game* does. Nor, certainly, is Thoreau's text meant to: most of the pages in his opening section (called "Economy") are explicitly addressed to "poor students" rather than a general reading public (5), and they are filled with a great deal of literary and religious allusions to bemoan how "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (8) under the whims of society and the market economy. This does present a theory regarding the necessities of life that *Walden, a game* later embodies through its mechanics, but it does not even begin to describe the author's actual experience at Walden Pond until nearly thirty pages later in the book's second section (entitled "Where I lived and What I lived for"). In other words, while the game's opening moments invest a great deal of energy in trying to foster a sense of immediacy between the player and natural setting in which Thoreau's experience took place, Thoreau himself seems to have done the opposite through his discussions, digressions, and multiple allusions to other literary works in his writing.⁴⁷

Aside from not being reflective of the book's opening lines, the passage around which *Walden, a game*'s introductory cinematic is structured actually omits a great deal of the original quote. Here is the full passage as it appears in Thoreau's *Walden*, with the cut portions bolded and italicized:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, ***and see if I could not learn what it had to teach***, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. ***I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary.*** I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to ***put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and*** reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, ***why then*** to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, ***and publish its meanness to the world***; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and ***be able*** to give a true account of it ***in my next excursion*** (65).

Many of these omissions could be justified as cutting down Thoreau's wordy, comma-ridden prose into something that is easier to follow, a strategy that contributes to keeping the player's attention for the purposes of narrative immersion as much as it is aesthetically practical and economically viable for a voiceover budget. After all, such heavy editing is common in citations of Thoreau (and other famous authors) across popular culture. Even still, taken together, these omissions also work to minimize the kind of academic mediation found within Thoreau's allusive and philosophical prose while emphasizing the experience of being present at Walden Pond. Thoreau's interest in the project was always about "learning what it had to teach" and "publish[ing] its meanness" as much as it was about the excursion itself (65). Cutting out his militant language regarding "rout[ing] all that was not life" may also be an indication of the game's uncertain position as presenting a virtual Walden Pond and thereby asking its players to, in some sense, "live what [is] not life" (65). At the same time, these edits also de-emphasize Thoreau as an authority on what is "not life." *Walden, a game's* Thoreau is not introduced as a practiced academic planning for his "next excursion," or as a radical trying to "drive life into a corner" in order to polemicize a life of "resignation" (65). Instead, what remains is a picture of Thoreau as a curious idealist, presaging a game which focuses on the lived experience of Thoreau experiment and allowing the player to draw their own conclusions from it.

Taken in this context, *Walden, a game's* overt attempts to immerse the player in an immediate, visually compelling, but ultimately artificial simulacrum of Walden Pond (and, for that matter, *Walden* the book) may seem suspect to Thoreauvian purists. To repeat the commonly-leveled critiques that continue to haunt adaptations of popular literature, one could read the push towards immersion as a "dumbing down" of the text, a myopic focus on an immediate, aesthetically appealing surface-level element of Thoreau's book – the fantasy of

lingering in the idyllic woods of Concord, Massachusetts – at the expense of its larger intellectual project. The virtual pond presented by *Walden, a game* is not the actual pond of Thoreau’s day, after all; despite its attempts to capture parts of that time and place, it remains a meticulously designed and ultimately unreal playground through which the player is tasked to wander. Accepting this inaccuracy and playing anyway would have probably been abhorrent to Thoreau, who famously (to quote a sentence conveniently removed from *Walden, a game*’s opening passage) “did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did [he] wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary” (65). If the experience of “living deliberately” is the goal for *Walden* (both the book and the game), immersing the player inside a simulated shadow of his reality that is full of digital distractions from “life” proper seems, at least on the surface, to be contrary to his entire intellectual project.

It must also be noted, however, that the actual Walden Pond as it exists at the time of this writing is *also* not the pond of Thoreau’s day. Even after it was designated as a Massachusetts State Reservation in 1922 (and later a federally recognized historic landmark), time, weather, and development have changed the face of the woods. Old footpaths have been expanded into maintained trails with board walks and wire fences to prevent erosion (Figure 53), the site of Thoreau’s

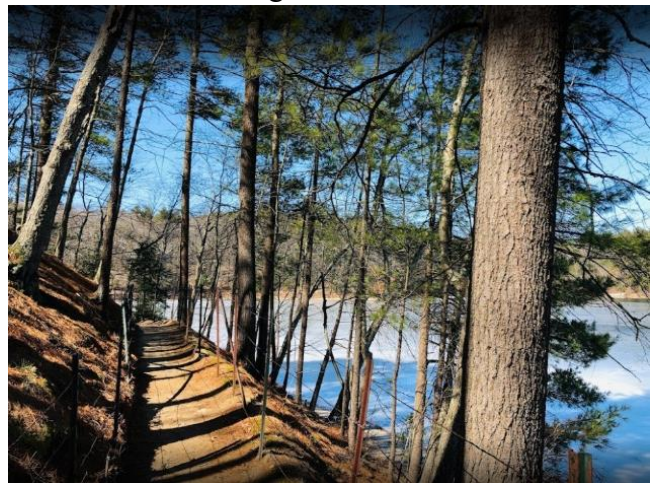


Figure 53 – Fenced-in trail along Walden Pond, 2011 (Photo Credit: Mars Biz)



Figure 54 – Site of Thoreau's cabin, 2021
(Photo Credit: Walden Woods Project)

cabin is marked with informational plaques and cement pylons (Figure 54), and legions of guests are constricted to rules that those of Thoreau's day might have balked at, including "no dogs or pets," "no fires," "no camping," and "no hammocks" ("Walden Pond State Reservation"). This is not to

disparage the work of those at the Walden Pond

State Reservation, but merely to reinforce a point made throughout this dissertation: like all adaptations, *Walden, a game* (and, for that matter, the modern-day park) is not meant to *replace* the experience of reading Thoreau's *Walden*, but to provide a new opportunity to engage with and reinterpret it. To frame the techniques of spatial immersion in *Walden, a game* as the construction of an alternate reality that aims to be so true-to-life that it can overwrite its source text and (as the journalists quoted in the beginning of this chapter might put it) the natural world itself is to fail to treat the game as part of an intertextual system. This is as true for Thoreau's book as it is for its digitally spatialized adaptation: his recording of his experiment in *Walden* was not meant to be a *replacement* for contemplation of the natural world, but to spur such contemplation in his readers through provocative philosophical musings and poetic reflections on his encounters with nature.

What this discussion of *Walden, a game*'s virtual pond in relation to its counterparts in Thoreau's text and the actual world reveals is the fundamentally similar fallacies at play in the concepts of fidelity and immersion when taken to their extremes. Both an adaptation's "fidelity" to its source and a game's sense of "immersion" are most often noticed when they are broken, after some design flaw or deviation from the source material serves to interrupt the user's

pleasurable experience of them.⁴⁸ Just as immersion-breaking elements such as graphical or mechanical glitches interrupt the user's experience of a game loop (that is, the sequence of actions the player continuously performs over the course of a gameplay experience), so too can particularly dissonant elements of adaptations be said to disrupt the loop of recognition between the adaptation and its source(s). But whereas it is common to place the blame for such a disruption solely on the "flawed" object or its creator – indeed, game scholars Katie Salen Tekinbas and Eric Zimmerman go as far as to label this the "immersive fallacy" (450) – Murray's conception of "the active creation of belief" discussed above suggests that the user bears responsibility for this experience-breaking dissonance as well. This is ultimately what fidelity criticism gets wrong about adaptation: by engaging with an adaptation *as an adaptation*, one is not immersing themselves in either the source text or its adaptation; instead, one is witnessing themselves as being an active element immersed within in the system of experience that includes both. It is the user who decides whether the collection of interacting formal and narrative elements before them acts as a fogged mirror or a practical microscope, an imperfect imitation of some external source or an opportunity to look closer. It is the user that connects or fails to connect the various elements which comprise an individual text with intertexts, contexts, and personal experiences in order to catalyze new interpretations and experiences through their interaction. To borrow terms discussed in previous chapters, the "active creation of belief" which fuels a user's experience of an adaptation is brought about by their "lusory attitude" towards it: a willingness to keep their abstracted conceptions of a given source text flexible but distinct enough to enable the act of interpretation for interpretation's sake. It is this process which activates the experience which emerges from the user's engagement with a game or adaptation, not some internal sense of technical immersion or textual fidelity.

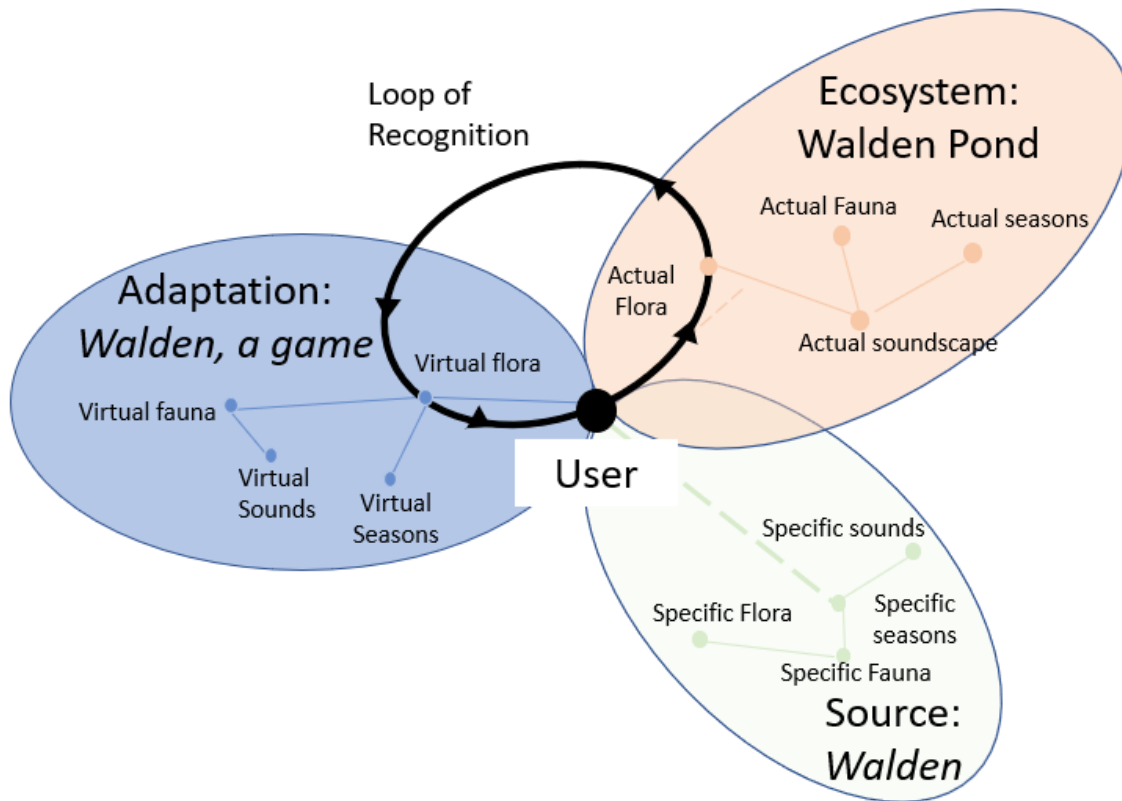


Figure 55 – Ecosystem of Walden Pond as part of larger intertextual system

When examined in light of the larger intertextual system of which it is a part, the audio-visual immersion of *Walden, a game*'s Walden Pond ends up serving the same function as the game's inclusion of readable books that Thoreau references or extra-textual historical background: it reincorporates elements of Thoreau's experience that are not included within the pages of a book into the user's system of experience. Unlike the experience of author himself, the trajectory of Thoreau's readers through his experiment is literally already written due to the affordances of print text. While readers may be interested in Thoreau's dense prose, they are not given particularly evocative descriptions of the actual layout of the pond, nor can most of them (especially modern readers) go into the woods around Walden Pond and relive the experiment themselves. The move towards recreating the space of Walden Pond connects *Walden, a game* (and, through it, *Walden* the book) to another system: the physical world of Walden Pond (Figure

55). In so doing, the game essentially frames the space of the pond as a tool by which the user may generate experiences rather than as a backdrop for a pre-determined set of events. It is not important that the player is unable to cut any tree or fish at any location, but it is important that they can freely explore those places at their own pace. It is not important that the location of a particular bush matches its historical location, but it is important that the player can stumble upon it and gather its fruit. It is not important that the digital creatures that appear are not always scripted to behave like they do in the book, but it is important that a player can simply spend the greater part of a virtual afternoon chasing a hare which they happened to spot on their way to get firewood. When activated by the user's explorations, such serendipitous moments can feed back into the textual system that is *Walden* and allow users access to some of the affective material that colored Thoreau's writing: namely, the dynamic of spontaneous discovery and free movement which natural spaces like Walden Pond afford.

Minimalist Mechanics: Designing Time for Contemplation

Recognizing oneself as being immersed within the collection of interconnected elements that constitute a game adaptation – which, in *Walden, a game*'s case, includes the game, Thoreau's book, and the context of Walden Pond as a facilitator of experience – does not give rise to an experience in and of itself. Instead, the experience emerges from the interactions between those elements, especially as they pertain to the user-driven processes of manipulating the game world (the core game loop) and making comparisons between the adaptation and its source(s) (the loop of recognition). *Walden, a game* rather explicitly kickstarts these processes

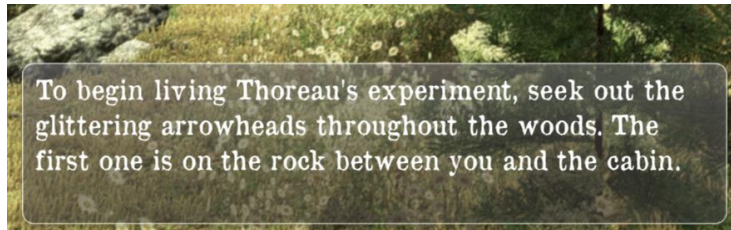


Figure 56 – Initial directions of *Walden*, a game

via a text box which appears immediately after the aforementioned opening cutscene ends and players find themselves able to move of their own accord. Written in a neat white font on an unobtrusive grey background (translucent as to not block the scenery behind it) reads a rather explicit set of directions: “To begin living Thoreau’s experiment, seek out the glittering arrowheads throughout the woods. The first one is on the rock between you and the cabin” (Figure 56). This deceptively simple instruction does two things typical of any game adaptation: first, it presents the player with an identifiable goal (initiating the game loop); second, it contextualizes the player’s actions in terms of Thoreau’s experiment (initiating the loop of recognition). However, the minimalist mechanics of *Walden*, a game illustrate how the actual operation of these processes can be anything but straightforward when one considers the role that the user’s lived experience plays within the overall system of a game adaptation.

As established by this opening textbox, the core game loop of *Walden*, a game – that is, the sequence of actions players are tasked with completing – seems to be about collecting the glinting arrowheads scattered about the gameworld (Figure 57). Clicking on any of these arrowheads while in close proximity triggers an animation of a tanned forearm (presumably belonging to the player-protagonist, Thoreau)



Figure 57 – The first arrowhead, “inspected”

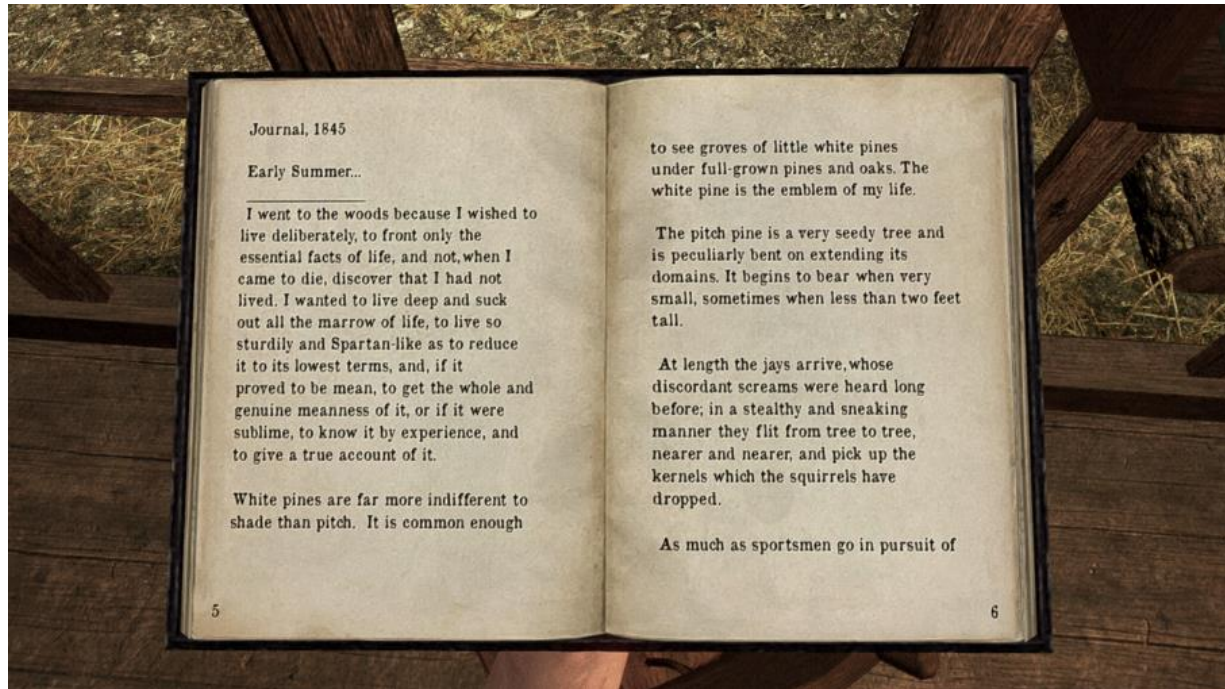


Figure 58 – Reviewing collected journal entries

reaching out to pick it up, followed by an audio clip of the game's Thoreau (Hirsch) reading a passage from Thoreau's *Walden* appropriate to the context in which it is found. Collecting the arrowhead found near Thoreau's uncompleted cabin, for example, results in a description of it as pulled from Thoreau's *Walden*, while collecting an arrowhead in Concord's general store prompts a musing on what constitutes "the cost of a thing." Every time a player picks up an arrowhead, the associated quote (or a paraphrased version of it) is automatically recorded in the player's in-game journal, which can be viewed at any point during the day with a press of a button (Figure 58). Journal entries are also created whenever a player "inspects" items by (as described above) holding down a particular button while facing flora, fauna, or any other potentially interesting in-game object. Doing so makes the in-game camera "zoom in" on the object, causing a quote from *Walden* to appear on what looks like a torn journal page alongside the sound of scribbling pen and a thoughtful "hm" from Hirsch. While the audio-visual feedback for collecting the arrowheads is certainly more vivid than when inspecting objects, both can be

seen as contributing to the same apparent goal: collecting Thoreau's thoughts in a written journal that compiles the player's interactions with the game.

Complicating their pursuit of these journal entries is the game's light survival mechanics. Players are tasked with procuring enough "food" (berries, beans, or other provisions), "fuel" (firewood), "shelter" (a completed cabin), and "clothing" to survive in this virtual wilderness. These are represented by initially invisible boxes along the bottom of the screen that get progressively more opaque as the need for each resource increases, visually representing the intrusion of human needs on one's enjoyment and contemplation of the world at hand (Figure 59). Most of these require completing some sort of repetitive task at pre-determined locations scattered about the map in order to either assuage an immediate need or bolster one's reserves and enable longer excursions. The need for "shelter," for example, is met by interacting with the



Figure 59 – Gathering berries to replenish low food supplies (detail enlarged)



Figure 60 – Shelter-building minigame

hammer and sawhorse near the cabin and rhythmically swinging one's mouse or control stick downwards in time with the hammer swings (Figure 60). Doing any of these tasks for too long results in the draining of a fifth in-game resource – “energy” – which is represented by dark shadows around the edge of the screen, the inability to sprint, and the occasional heavy breathing of the player

character. Whereas energy can be recovered by staring into a fire or simply taking a break from resource gathering, managing the game's final resource, “inspiration,” is less straightforward. Rather than the opaque icons which appear in the absence of physical resources or the overt audio-visual cues associated with low energy, low inspiration is marked by a dulling of the game's vibrant sounds and colors, eventually resulting in a quiet, greying landscape (Figure 61). The player must then recover inspiration by walking through the woods, inspecting local



Figure 61 – View of the game world while inspired (left) versus when uninspired (right)

animals, or even reading some of the classic works of literature scattered about the game world. Seeing as some arrowheads are only visible when one has sufficient inspiration and foregoing any of the other resources for long results in the player blacking out and returning to their cabin, it quickly becomes clear that players must achieve a balance between gathering resources and remaining inspired if they want to continue collecting arrowheads.

All of this seems to contribute to a simple game loop common to many works in the “survival game” genre: seek out arrowheads, which depletes one’s survival resources over time; replenish survival resources by doing tasks, which drains energy and inspiration; replenish energy/inspiration

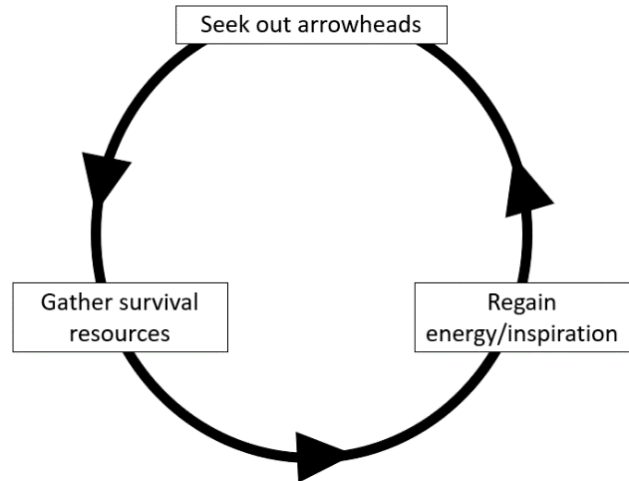


Figure 62 – *Walden*, a game's core game loop

by resting/walking until all arrowheads are visible; repeat the cycle (Figure 62).⁴⁹ As we saw in previous readings of game adaptations, game loops like this frequently resonate with the aspects of the source text. The choose-your-own-adventure style quandaries in Ryan North’s *To Be or Not to Be* act as a tongue-in-cheek reflection of Hamlet’s soliloquy; the allowance for strange solutions to puzzles through a sophisticated text parser in Beam Software’s *The Hobbit* mirrors the literary protagonist’s clever and rule-bending solution to a deadly riddle contest; and the rigid cycle of play in Storybrewers’ *Good Society* parallels the plot structure and pacing of a Jane Austen novel. *Walden, a game* is no exception in this regard – in fact, its mechanics seem to present a more literal simulation of its source text than other literary game adaptations discussed here, as the “rules” which dictate the pace of the game are explicitly set by Thoreau himself in *Walden*’s first chapter:

The necessities of life for man in this climate may, accurately enough, be distributed under the several heads of Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel; for not till we have secured these are we prepared to entertain the true problems of life with freedom and a prospect of success (11-12).

In this reading, the act of collecting arrowheads and listening to the quotes they trigger represents Thoreau coming up with an original thought, “entertain[ing] the true problems of life” so long as he has sufficient energy and resources to do so. The fact that some arrowheads only appear when one has adequate energy/inspiration can emulate the fits and starts of the writing process, or simply reward the player for taking on the ambling pace of the author/protagonist as they cycle through the game loop. From a gameplay perspective, the goal becomes collecting enough Thoreau quotes from these arrowheads and observations to fill the in-game journal into an abridged version of *Walden*.

But, as *Walden, a game* illustrates, to identify a game adaptation’s core loop and connect it to the source text is one thing; understanding it from the perspective of a user’s experience is quite another. While *Walden, a game*’s core gameplay loop shares a structure with resource-gathering survival simulations, the actual implementation of these mechanics are not pressing enough to provide much of a challenge for most players. The player’s need for shelter can be easily met on the very first day with a few minutes of work, and any further maintenance that may be required in later seasons can be easily completed in a few seconds of interaction with the sawhorse directly beside the cabin. Fuel and clothing can replenished at any of the many wood-cutting stations or hanging garments (respectively) scattered along the trails, in the cabin, or at other residences, and both resources only need to be restocked every other day. Even the resource most frequently in need of replenishment, food, can be easily assuaged by gathering berries from seasonally fruiting bushes scattered around the pond, fishing at pre-determined fishing holes, buying resources at the general store, or simply taking a pie off the windowsill of

the Thoreau family home in Concord. If a player somehow lets one or more of these resources dwindle to nothing, they will find themselves immediately sent back to their cabin (which conveniently provides easy access to reliable methods for collecting all of these resources) without any loss of time or progress. This ease and lack of consequence for survival is, of course, consistent with Thoreau's insistence throughout *Walden* that such a simple life is simply earned, and that "it is not necessary that a man should earn his living by the sweat of his brow, unless he sweats easier than I do" (52). Even still, from a gameplay perspective, such lenient survival mechanics do not pose a significant obstacle to collecting arrowheads, even for those unfamiliar with games of this type.

Additionally, while standard game logic (and the game's explicit directions) would seem to imply that collecting arrowheads is the goal of the game, their actual function within the gameplay system makes their role less straightforward. The arrowheads themselves function more like breadcrumbs than "Easter eggs," as they are usually placed in plain sight along footpaths, trails, and easily accessible areas. While a sizeable portion are available from the beginning of the game, many appear in roughly the same areas as previous arrowheads as the seasons change, essentially "refreshing" well-trod locations rather than forcing the player to search every nook and cranny to gather them. At the same time, there is no numerical indication of how many arrowheads one has collected or how many are left to find, or even which entries within the in-game journal were drawn from an arrowhead-audio clip and which were recorded after "inspecting" a particular object. This runs counter to a great deal of similar exploration-focused games, which often contain some sort of encyclopedia or status bar to keep track of collected objects in a quantifiable way.⁵⁰ The task list the game does have – whimsically labelled as a "To do or not to do" list in the front page of the journal – is limited to minor money-making

activities like surveying, collecting certain fish species, or other tasks Thoreau himself took on during his stay at Walden Pond (43). The money earned from these tasks is enough to spend at the general store and supplement one's resources (if, indeed, they need any supplementing at all), which make it even easier to proceed without worrying about survival mechanics. The economic aspect, too, is consistent with Thoreau's budgeting in the "Economy" section of *Walden*, and he mentions taking on many of these odd jobs throughout his time at the woods as a minor supplement to his living. But without any real need to complete these tasks – or even, for that matter, any mechanical reward or visible progression from collecting arrowheads – the goals of *Walden, a game* can easily become muddled.

In fact, unlike even the unconventional games discussed in this project, the user's progress through *Walden, a game* is not at all dependent on the user's actions.⁵¹ Save for clicking a dialogue box to progress to the next in-game day, the game will continue through its cycle from summer to fall to winter to spring without any input from the player. Beneath the veneer of common game-like tasks such as collectible items, resource-earning mini-games, and a "to-do" list full of side-quests, the experience of *Walden, a game* is (mechanically, anyway) a game about waiting. No matter how quickly users build up their cabin or how many arrowheads they are able to collect, they will not be able to cut the game's six-hour runtime – made up of twenty-four in-game days of fifteen minutes each, divided into four in-game "seasons" – any shorter. Any attempt to speed through the game – holding down the "sprint" button to get anywhere, gathering materials or constructing the cabin all at once and as quickly as possible, or picking up new arrowheads before the last audio clip has finished playing – is actually discouraged by the aforementioned inspiration mechanic, which turns the vibrant world dark and grey and makes some arrowheads (and thus a false sense of "progress") unattainable. Even those who ignore the

greying color palette and continue their mad dash through *Walden* anyway will soon find themselves with nothing to do; there are only a finite number of collectibles each day and season, and the only way to get to the next “level” is by waiting for the next morning to come. Any sort of time-pressure dynamic this may invoke (a rush to complete everything in a set amount of time, for example) is undercut by the fact the game allows players to continue playing through spring, if they so choose, rather than see the game’s ending cinematic. The only way to progress through the game is not through overcoming challenges, becoming more skilled at a particular task, or even learning more about Thoreau, but to idle away the virtual days until the coming of next spring and just *be* in this virtual place.

While the limited time allotted to each in-game day and season may not hinder one’s ability to complete the game, it does effectively attribute equal mechanical value to most activities in the game. Because gathering survival materials is relatively simple, completing money-making tasks like surveying or collecting fish specimens for a research colleague becomes just as valuable as “unproductive” activities such as taking a stroll through the virtual woods. This even extends to the act of reading in-game text: unlike in many games, where stopping to check a map or skim an in-game journal temporarily stops the game clock, the in-game timer of *Walden, a game* continues marching forward while users read. This means that time spent reading a passage from Emerson’s abridged copy of Homer’s *Iliad* (left, quite conveniently, on one of the rocks near your homestead) has the same in-game value as picking up arrowheads to hear audio clips from *Walden* or gathering survival resources. The act of reading is thus not separate from gameplay as it so often is in other games, but a reasonable gameplay choice that requires an in-game time commitment. While the mechanical benefit of reading is minimal – it is one of the many ways players may regain energy/inspiration, signified

by a slightly more vibrant color palette as they go about the gameworld and the appearance of certain arrowheads – having it “cost” the same amount of gametime as other elements in the game loop implies that its intrinsic value is high as well. In fact, the only time that users are allowed to read without running down the game clock is at the end of each day, when they are automatically presented with their journal and may leaf through it to reflect upon the insights they have collected thus far by collecting arrowheads and “examining” game objects. The combination of a constantly running game clock and the forced journal at the end of each “day” encourages players to “live deliberately” within the game world, spending their days doing what they want to do without worry of a pressing need for survival and using each “night” to reflect upon the value of these activities to Thoreau and the making of his own book.

For users embroiled in a culture that values productivity, efficiency, and constant stimulation – especially those users who play modern games, a medium which is often predicated on artificially producing these very pillars – such an experience may be a rather uncomfortable one. To play a minimally interactive game in a world where games are intensely interactive is not unlike the introduction of sound films to a movie-going audience used to the constant in-house musical accompaniment of “silent” films: the absence of a core element of the media form (in this case, identifiable goals and worthwhile challenges) can be unsettling when connected with the user’s expectations of it.⁵² Here in the virtual woods of *Walden, a game*, time is the only currency: a casual stroll is just as valuable to one’s progress as is hoeing beans, earning money through odd jobs, or seeking out arrowheads in a vain attempt at completionism. Here there is no opportunity for skimming as one could in the print version of *Walden*, nor does the external dynamic of an academically-imposed deadline (all too common in most students’ introductory experiences to Thoreau) exert pressure on the experience. Only here, in a medium

that is all about constant distraction and engagement, can users approach *Walden, a game* as a guided meditation on how to simply exist without being productive, both in the game and (perhaps) in the world.

The specific nature of the reflections afforded by *Walden, a game*'s mechanical minimalism will necessarily vary from user to user; what is important to note is how the game's core mechanics not only resonate with the source text, but are also sparse enough to allow users to interpret their experience beyond the dyadic relationship between game and book and instead encompass the user's relationship to other aspects of their lives. Given time to think rather than complete the various tasks usually demanded of a typical survival game, the user is encouraged to see themselves as acting as an element within the game system (one who acts and makes decisions within the game loop), an element within the intertextual system (connecting and reinterpreting ideas by fueling the loop of recognition), and a person who is experiencing that which emerges from the interactions between all of these elements (Figure 63). In one sense, the

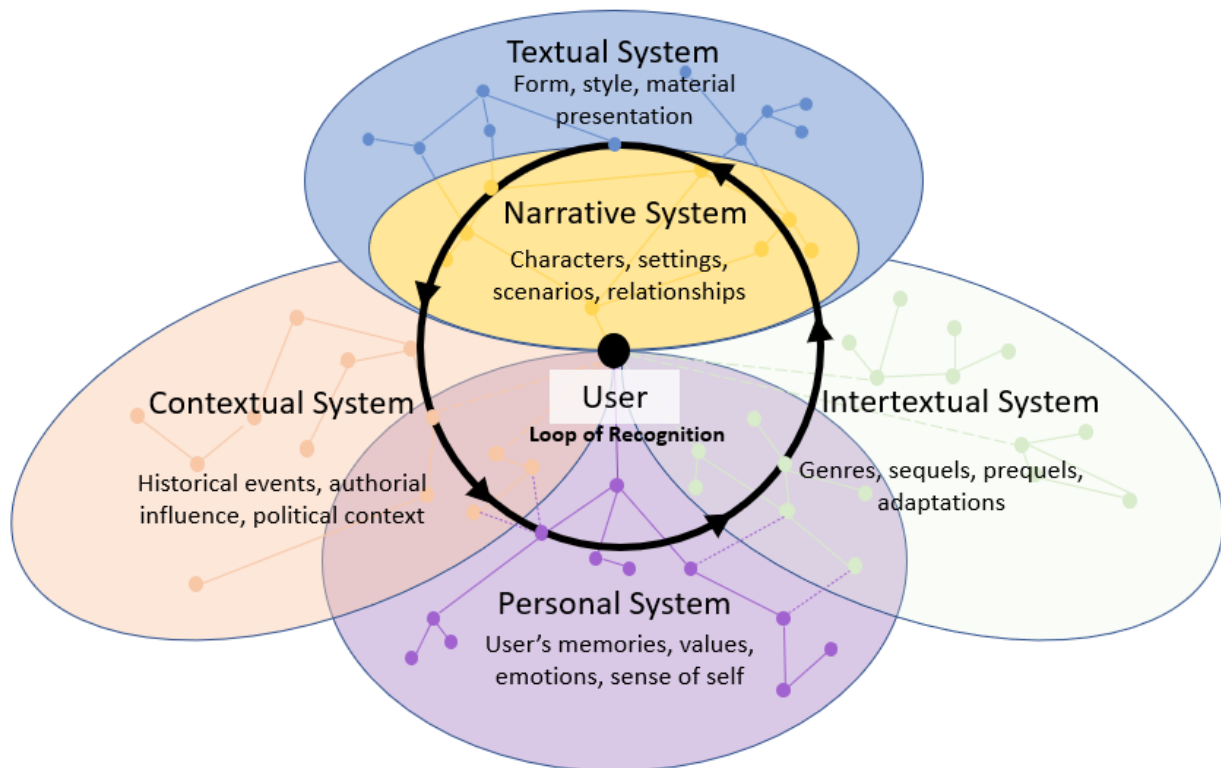


Figure 63 – Interacting systems of experience

relative silence between collecting Thoreau quotes and the unobtrusive and peaceful game environment gives users a chance to assess the philosophy in light of their own lived experience, to think deeply about the world in which they live and the way they have chosen to inhabit it as they meander across the footpaths of this virtual pond. The user's dualistic experience of the system as both internal element and external experiencer is, fittingly enough, very similar to Thoreau's thoughts on life itself:

However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but a spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you. (98).

This "doubleness" is at the heart of engaging with game adaptations as explored throughout this project. As Beam Software's *The Hobbit* shows, it is the doubleness of being a spectator who knows what is "supposed" to happen and being an active agent in the story; as Storybrewers' *Good Society* shows, it is the doubleness of interpreting what a text or character *has* been and imagining the possibility of what it *could* be; as *Walden, a game* shows, it is the doubleness of being immersed within a single depiction of a textual world and connected to the wider intertextual system outside of it. And, to borrow a turn of phrase from Thoreau, it is this doubleness that makes adaptations and their sources (or, indeed, games and literature in general) "poor friends and neighbors sometimes," provided a user cannot let go of fidelity criticism in favor of a more playful interpretative attitude (98).

In another sense, however, the expansion of this textual system through *Walden, a game*'s minimalist mechanics can also encourage users to think deeply about the act of gameplay itself. After all, despite the fact that the space it presents has no physical reality, playing *Walden, a game* is not at all separate from the real world. Users are spending real-world time to contemplate real-world philosophical thought as they inhabit a virtual space, time that they could

very well be spending on any number of other activities. Though the game's minimal mechanics and time-based progression equates the values of "productive" and "unproductive" activities within the game world, one may find this dynamic to be dissonant when compared with their lived experience. Perhaps what *Walden, a game* reveals for these users is what Thoreau calls the "stereotyped and unconscious despair concealed even what are called the games and amusements of mankind," the resignation inherent in the desperate pursuit of a false productivity via a repetitive game loop (9). For such users, *Walden, a game* is indeed (to echo a *CNN* headline) an "anti-video game video game" in that it uses its immersive aesthetics and minimal mechanics to deconstruct the form, in so doing, present a damning critique of game adaptation. As I hope will be clear by now, such a reading leaves us back where we started, both in the context of this conclusion and in this project as a whole: with game adaptations being, at best, frivolous and derivative forms of popular culture and, at worst, "unfaithful" simulacra which undermine the integrity of culturally important objects. While there is a critique to be made in *Walden, a game's* departure from more conventional games (and, for that matter, game adaptations), the target of this critique – much like the fault of "immersion-breaking" moments as discussed by Murray above – is not to be found in any particular game adaptation, but in those who play them.

Conclusion: Play and Productivity

At the beginning of this project, I defined game adaptations as playable digital or analog systems based upon another work or works, primarily print literature. While the previous chapters have all given a better understanding of what is meant by "system" – interacting formal, narrative, and intertextual elements; gameplay loops and loops of recognition; user agency, expectations, and abstractions that facilitate interpretation – much less time has been allotted to

what is meant by “play.” Like “game” and “adaptation,” it is a term that has been defined and redefined over the years by multiple scholars in multiple contexts, from child psychology (Lev Vygotsky’s concept of play as a “transitional stage” in the development of the imagination [Bodrova and Leong 375]) to game studies (Johan Huizinga’s human-centric approach to play and Roger Caillois’ classification of play as “free, uncertain, unproductive, make-believe, rule-governed, [and] separate from everyday life” [Caillois 9-10]) to even literary theory (Derrida’s concept of “free play” between presence and absence in literary structure [284]). Modern parlance makes matters no less confusing, as a host of common-use definitions stretch “play” to cover the use of instruments (“playing the violin”), acting (“playing a role”), being deceitful (“playing tricks,” “playing dumb”), and movement of specific objects (“the play of the lights”). This is not to mention the complications that can arise from English’s rather unique linguistic distinction between “game” and “play;” many of the languages in which the above theorists were writing – Vygotsky’s Russian, Huizinga’s Dutch, and the French of Caillois and Derrida – make no such distinction, rendering “play” (*играть*, *spelen*, *jouer*) as the verb form of “game” (*игра*, *spel*, *jeu*). Rather than rehash one of the theoretical justifications produced by game studies theorists, I have decided to end with *Walden, a game* because both it and the book on which it was based perhaps best embody the sense of play as understood (and misunderstood) by those approaching the concept of game adaptation: as free, deliberate, and inherently valuable exploration of life.

Given the passages from *Walden* cited above, it is understandable to conclude that Thoreau’s *Walden* (and the game that was inspired by it) does not present a favorable view of play. Thoreau tells his readers at one point that one “should not *play* life, or study it merely...but earnestly *live* it from beginning to end” (38), elsewhere portraying play as something that

“comes after work” and is not to be found in the “desperate things” most people consider to be games (9). But, as the epigraph that opened this concluding chapter indicates, Thoreau also seems to be saying the direct opposite when he writes “children, who play life, discern its true law and relations more clearly than men, who fail to live it worthily, but who think that they are wiser by experience, that is, by failure” (69). In the former passage, to “play life” is a negative act, something that contrasts with the actual experience of living life; in the latter, to “play life” is a positive act, one which breeds more understanding of the “true” than any wisdom gained through experience. Reconciling these two seemingly contradictory statements means understanding that there are two competing versions of “play” and “experience” at work here. In the first quote, Thoreau uses “play” in the sense that one “plays pretend,” an idle (or, as he would perhaps put it, non-*deliberate*) mimetic pursuit that contrasts starkly with an active (deliberate) engagement with the actual. This echoes the sentiment of not only the critics of *Walden, a game* as cited above, but also any who would dismiss a game (or any) adaptation for not being “true” to their personal understanding of the “original” on which it is based. However, in his assertion that “children, who play life, discern its true law and relations better than men,” Thoreau evokes “play” in the sense that one “goes outside to play,” a joyful and free activity that ultimately cannot be done wrong so long as one keeps playing and ignores the “wisdom” of those who men would say otherwise (69). It is this second sense of play that is more in line with the interpretive play of creating and engaging with game adaptations as experience-generating systems in and with which users play.

In one of the most explicitly transcendental passages of his book (and, fittingly, gathered across multiple in-game seasons in the game adaptation), Thoreau explicitly rejects the sense of “play as pretending” discussed above for this freeing sense of play:

As I was leaving the Irishman's roof after the rain, bending my steps again to the pond, my haste to catch pickerel, wading in retired meadows, in sloughs and bog-holes, in forlorn and savage places, appeared for an instant trivial to me who had been sent to school and college; but as I ran down the hill toward the reddening west, with the rainbow over my shoulder, and some faint tinkling sounds borne to my ear through the cleansed air, from I know not what quarter, my Good Genius seemed to say – Go fish and hunt far and wide day by day – farther and wider – and rest thee by many brooks and hearth-sides without misgiving. Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth. Rise free from care before the dawn, and seek adventures. Let the noon find thee by other lakes, and the night overtake thee everywhere at home. There are no larger fields than these, no worthier games than may here be played (141-142)

At the beginning of this passage, his “haste” to complete such a mundane task as catching pickerel – similar to the player’s haste to complete any given task in *Walden, a game* – seems “trivial” when read through the lens of things like “school and college,” “civilizing” institutions within a culture that values purpose through productivity. To complete these idle tasks, especially for an educated person (i.e. someone familiar enough with *Walden* to do a reading of its game adaptation), may seem at first to be avoiding the important elements of life, “playing” in the sense of “playing pretend.” But what awakens in Thoreau (and, perhaps, the player of *Walden, a game*) is the sense of freedom that comes from being unproductive, from “resting without misgiving” and going forth to “seek adventures” of one’s own choosing. The phrasing of his sentiment that there are “no worthier games than may here be played” simultaneously evokes games as arising from specific spaces (such as the immersive space of *Walden, a game*) while also putting the responsibility of this act on the player rather than the game itself (an approach made explicit by minimalist mechanics). Thoreau’s sentiment implies that it is not the “field” itself that produces meaningful experiences but the individual on it and the actions they choose to take. In other words, Thoreau is not rejecting play or games so much as he is encouraging readers to “play deliberately” – a phrase that happens to be the tagline for *Walden, a game*.

This sense of play as something actively pursued and which arises from a given “field” – something that game studies theorists Katie Salen Tekinbas and Eric Zimmerman have elsewhere usefully rendered as “free movement with a more rigid structure” (304) – is exactly the sense of play that is core to both the creation of and engagement with game adaptations as systems. To create a game adaptation (or, indeed, any adaptation) is to celebrate the freedom of interpretation within a familiar textual structure, to call attention to the various aspects by which we identify (and identify with) a source as mutable elements that play off one another rather than immovable features set in stone by a single creator. To engage with a game adaptation is not only to *play with* a text and its intertexts – directing familiar characters to make new decisions (as in *To Be or Not to Be* or Beam Software’s *The Hobbit*), mixing in tropes from other genres (as in *Good Society*), or simply taking time to freely wander around a spatialized version of a source (*Walden, a game*) – but to become an element *at play* within the system, fueling the processes which give rise to new experiences by actively making connections between the systems many formal, intertextual, and contextual elements. Like the version of Thoreau’s text that exists within the in-game journal at the end of their time with *Walden, a game*, the experience that emerges from the interactions of the many elements in this system is not the result of a single source text, nor is it the result of an adapter’s unique interpretation of this material, nor is it even the result of the user’s choices and actions. Instead, the meaning is to be found in the interactions between these elements, the firing synapses connecting one element to another in a network that bridges literature and media, human and text. It is by virtue of this process that an adaptation is an adaptation and a game is a game. And even though the actual experiences evoked by such activities are unique to each user due to the constellation of knowledges and connections each introduces to the system, playing and talking about game adaptations may help us better

understand the ways in which our personal systems of experience – as well as those of the artists which create the texts we engage with – shape our views of the world.

Notes

¹ Those readers who guessed that only the final scenario (involving the Vizier) awards points are only half right: those who have earned the “Weapon Use” skill can fight off the threat and earn a total of three points and the “Blessed” status, while those with no such skill will earn one point and be branded as an “Outlaw.” This outcome also gives the active player the option to bring the case before the Sultan rather than fight the Vizier’s guards, but that scenario requires that the player has somehow come into the possession of the legendary “Brass Trumpet” in a previous encounter in order to proceed. Such highly specific (and generally inscrutable) decision-trees are rather common in the “Book of Tales,” further emphasizing the difficulty in making strategic narrative decisions during gameplay.

² The view that there has been a cultural and aesthetic convergence between film and video games has become standard in new media scholarship since Lev Manovich’s *The Language of New Media* and Bolter and Grusin’s *Remediation*. Full books devoted to the subject include Jasmina Kallay’s *Gaming Film: How Games are Reshaping Contemporary Cinema*.

³ Provisionary theorizations of game adaptations include Douglas Brown and Tanya Krzywinska’s “Movie-games and Game-movies: Towards an Aesthetic of Transmediality” (2009), Neil Randall’s 2017 article “Source as Paratext: Video Game Adaptations and the Question of Fidelity,” and the contributions of Kevin M. Flanagan and Kyle Meikle to the *Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies* (2017), not to mention the occasional close-reading of video games based on popular franchises such as those in anthologies like Gretchen Papazian and Joseph Michael Sommers’ *Game On Hollywood!* (2013). Meikle also includes a chapter on video game adaptations in his 2019 monograph *Adaptations in the Franchise Era*.

⁴ Although her unmarried surname is printed on the cited edition of her book *Rules of Play*, I will be referring to “Katie Salen” by her preferred name “Katie Salen Tekinbas” throughout this dissertation.

⁵ The reason I use the admittedly clunky term “‘choose-your-own-adventure’ style gamebooks” throughout this chapter is to differentiate this game genre from both the term gamebook (which can refer to manuals for tabletop roleplaying games as well as gamebooks such as Steve Jackson’s *Fighting Fantasy* series [1982-1995], both of which involve dice rolling and other complex systems) and the proprietary “Choose Your Own Adventure” (CYOA) brand popular in the 1970s and 80s. While *To Be or Not to Be* is certainly modeled after the latter (as are most contemporary choice-driven gamebooks, hence the generic descriptor of CYOA), it should not be confused with an actual title in the CYOA series.

⁶ Some notable concise histories of literary theory include Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory* (first edition in 1983), Peter Barry’s *Beginning Theory* (first edition in 1995), and Joseph North’s *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (2017).

⁷ In his 1970 essay *S/Z*, Barthes describes the goal of modern literature as “making the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (*S/Z* 4). Such modern texts that do this (like Honore de Balzac’s short story *Sarrasine*, which serves as the basis for his work in *S/Z*) he calls “writerly,” while texts which maintains “the pitiless divorce” between producers and users he calls “readerly.” “From Work to Text” is in many ways a slightly expanded re-articulation of this distinction, but I use the later essay instead of *S/Z* because it better reflects the simultaneity of the two concepts; whereas Barthes seems to frame readerly and writerly texts as separate categories of literary object (with one being more desirable than the other), he describes the relationship between “work” and “Text” as being one based on “relativity of the frames of

reference” rather than a piece of literature’s identity (155). It is this framing of approach rather than strict taxonomy that interests me here.

⁸ The “Ship of Theseus” is a philosophical thought experiment thought to originate with the works of Plato and Heraclitus around 400-500 CE (Rescher 63). The general premise is to imagine that one was in possession of the ship of the fabled hero Theseus and wanted to preserve it. Over the centuries, planks from the ship would rot and need to be replaced until not a single piece of the original ship remained. In such a situation, the question becomes whether or not the vessel is still the same ship on which Theseus sailed and (if it is not) when it changed. The same question applies to adaptations: after how many changes to plot, character, genre, or medium of presentation does a new version of a text become a completely different text?

⁹ The fact that this notion of “text as palimpsest” is in turn borrowed from Phillipe Lejeune and Jorge Luis Borges among others makes the title all the more fitting considering the content of Genette’s work.

¹⁰ A grey area exists with more direct transpositions – interlingual translations, digital versions of celluloid film, or ports of classic video games on modern game consoles. One could make the argument that works like these (especially translations) may be considered “transformative” in their level of transposition. Although this project does not explicitly explore these texts, the framework presented here certainly is compatible with them.

¹¹ This is not to say that the writers of *Cahiers du Cinema* were against adaptation as such. In fact, in his essay “Adaptation, or Cinema as Digest,” founding member Andre Bazin actually defends adaptations as “aesthetically justified, independent of its pedagogical and social value” predicting that “a critic of the year 2050 would find not a novel out of which a play and a film had been ‘made,’ but rather a single work reflected through three art forms, an artistic

pyramid with three sides, all equal in the eyes of the critic” (26-27). The critics of *Cahiers*, much like early adaptation scholars, were against the French cinematic establishment’s championing of stylistically conservative works meant to be “faithful” reproductions of classic literature. This is one of the elements of “la tradition de qualité” that Francois Truffaut lambasts in his famous 1954 essay “A Certain Tendency of French Cinema,” and it was the rebellion against this evaluative norm fueled the French New Wave. For more on this, see Robert Stam, “Adaptation and the French New Wave: A Study in Ambivalence,” *Interfaces* 34 (2012-2013), 177-197.

¹² Of course, genre theory has a long history in both literature and rhetoric among other humanistic fields, and many of the issues regarding genre that this project takes on are informed by these fields as well. However, because adaptation scholarship is more often in direct conversation with film studies, I discuss the notion of film genre here. For further discussion of genre outside of film studies, see Amy Devitt’s *Writing Genres* (2004).

¹³ For the purposes of this writing, I will be using “network” interchangeably with the notion of an open system, highlighting the connections between individual systems. This is consistent with the term as used by network theorists such as Mark McGurl, Alexander Galloway, Manuel Castells, and Eugene Thacker.

¹⁴ It is important to note that while the concept of a gameplay loop is widespread, it (like many other terms in game design) is seldom formalized in a consistent way due to the relative youth and diversity of game design as an art form. For example, the concept that I will be calling a game’s “core loop” – borrowing from the terminology of game designers Nathan Lovato, Emmanuel Guardiola, and Daniel Cook among others – has often been referred to as a “core game mechanism” or “core mechanic” in influential game design manuals such as Tekinbas and

Zimmerman's *Rules of Play* and Tracy Fullerton's *Game Design Workshop*. While both of these conceptions share a definition as "the essential play activity players perform again and again in a game," I will refer to it as a "loop" here both to differentiate it from the slightly more specific notion of "mechanic" as defined by Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek and to reveal its parallel to the process of recognition in adaptation (Tekinbas and Zimmerman 316).

¹⁵ The print version of North's text, of course, involves slightly more work on the part of the reader. Instead of automatically being presented with information, they are directed to a particular page, requiring them to physically navigate to that page to continue the story. This relative freedom allows for more opportunities the player to "cheat" by selecting other paths, as well as more opportunities for comedy. For example, the third page of the print version (right after North's narrator explains the "rules" and direct readers to later page) addresses the reader with a "Whoah, whoah, slow down there, cowboy! . . . Instead of following those instructions, you just kept reading what came next like this is an ordinary book! THIS BOOK IS CRAZY INSANE; HOW ARE YOU EVEN ACTING LIKE THIS IS AN ORDINARY BOOK??" (North 3). While an examination of the differences between the print and digital versions would certainly highlight the effect that materiality has on a user's experience (and shed light on the issue of "porting" analog games to digital interfaces as adaptation), this chapter will be dealing solely with the digital version of *To Be or Not to Be* for ease of explanation. For an excellent analysis of how the print version plays with authorial intent, see Emma Leigh Waldron's 2015 article "The Pleasures of Adaptation in Ryan North's *To Be or Not to Be*."

¹⁶ This is a plainly-rendered version of the famous "Riddle of the Sphinx" from Greek mythology. According to the legend, a lion with the face of a man asks this of the hero Oedipus,

who answers correctly and causes the Sphinx to kill itself in a rage. Other versions of the riddle have found their way into modern popular culture ever since.

¹⁷ Of course, the suspicion of popular culture objects goes back even further than film: Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) plays off of the position of gothic romances in Regency Era England, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605) pokes fun at readers of classic romances, and Plato feared the corruption of youth who spend too much time on poetry over philosophy. I bring up the medium of film here due to its core relationship to modern adaptation studies.

¹⁸ Ballantine Books' 1965 US edition of *The Hobbit* is perhaps the first to have "the enchanting prelude to *The Lord of the Rings*" emblazoned on its front cover, but the phrase appears not only on later editions of Ballantine's *Hobbit* (1970, 1992), but on versions from other publishers including Random House (1986), Harper Collins (1998), and Thorndike Press (2003). Many of these are archived by collector Pieter Collier on the site tolkienlibrary.com.

¹⁹ According to folklorists, a "neck-riddle" (or *Halslösungsrätsel*) is an intentionally unsolvable query whose hyper-specific answer is known only by the one posing it. Such riddles are often posed by heroes or trickster figures facing judgment in order to "save their neck," hence the name. Dan Pagis cites Samson's riddle to the Philistines from Judges 14:14 ("Out of the eater came forth food, and out of the strong came forth sweetness," referring to the honey in the beehive of a lion he has just killed) and Rumpelstiltskin's insistence that others guess his name as examples of this (see Pagis 95).

²⁰ One could argue, of course, that riddles do not cease to be riddles after being solved due to the memetic functions of folk-sayings. The "riddlee," in this model, is obligated to become a "riddler" and continue spreading the riddle into the wider culture, and the "game" continues in this fashion. Though fascinating, this is outside of the scope of this chapter, and

does not negate the fact that the now-informed riddlee still can no longer “solve” that particular riddle in the classic sense.

²¹ The distinction between Melbourne House and Beam Software as entities is a messy one. Alfred Milgrom and Naomi Besen founded the company as “Melbourne House Publishers Ltd” in 1977 in order to publish digital books. In 1980, they created Beam Software (“Beam” is derived from a contraction of their names) as a subsidiary to develop games alongside their other digital books, distributing both through a branch of Melbourne House in the UK. However, after the enormous success of *The Hobbit* in 1982 and the selling of their UK branch to Virgin Games Ltd. in 1987, Beam Software became an independent entity. To make matters even more confusing, Beam Software re-registered the name “Melbourne House” after Virgin Games allowed the brand to lapse in 1997, adopting it as the name of the development company. This lasted for barely two years, before the studio was bought and sold to Infogrames (1999), then Atari (2003), and finally to Krome Studios (2006) before finally being shuttered in 2010. In order to sidestep Melbourne House’s complicated historical continuity and remain consistent in my choice to attribute games to developers whenever possible, I have decided to keep use “Beam Software’s *Hobbit*” for this project. For more on this, see MobyGames’ article on the history of “Krome Studios Melbourne.”

²² Nick Montfort describes text adventures as a subcategory of interactive fiction more generally: “a text adventure can therefore be described as an interactive fiction work in which the interactor controls a player character who sets out on out-of-the-ordinary undertakings involving risk or danger” (6). Although Montfort specifically avoids calling interactive fiction works “games” in order to keep his interpretation of the form open (“there has been little discussion as to whether ‘game’ and ‘puzzle’ are truly essential to the form” [14]), he goes on to discuss

“adventure games” as a short-lived commercial genre later in his work (193). As *The Hobbit* falls under this commercial definition (and the definition of games as systems I have established in chapter 1), I refer to *The Hobbit* and games like it as “text adventure games” throughout this chapter.

²³ The unseen narrator of Crowther and Woods’ *Colossal Cave Adventure* (the ur-text of the text adventure game genre) is famously sarcastic in their commentary. Upon typing the command to kill a dragon, the narrator responds by saying “WITH WHAT, YOUR BARE HANDS?” If the player then types “yes,” the narrator responds with the response “CONGRATULATIONS! YOU HAVE JUST VANQUISHED A DRAGON WITH YOUR BARE HANDS! (UNBELIEVABLE, ISN'T IT?)” and the player is allowed to progress. Similar whimsical narration can be found in *Zork* and its predecessors and became part of the playful culture of text-adventure creators (see Montfort 101).

²⁴ I mention “falsely” because, according to Megler herself, “there’s a location (the Goblin’s Dungeon) that uses [an override] mechanism to create a dynamic map, rather than having fixed connections to other locations: for each direction, an override routine is called that randomly picks a ‘next location’ for the character to arrive in from a given list of possible locations” (3). Much to many player’s chagrin, those trying to methodically map the maze would be unable to even if they wanted to.

²⁵ The laborious process of escaping includes waiting for Thorin to be thrown in your cell by Goblins (assuming he is still following you), then getting him to pick you up and move you closer to the window (“SAY TO THORIN ‘GET ME AND MOVE WEST’”) so you can climb out into the first chamber of the maze again. This is complicated by Thorin’s tendency to

occasionally say “NO” and refuse to comply with the player’s commands, especially if they are repeatedly asking things of him.

²⁶ In fact, multiple walkthroughs of the game explicitly recommend killing Gollum as the most efficient way to progress. A player by the name of Gethyn Jones, frustrated with the game’s inability to accept his answer to one of Gollum’s riddles, wrote into the March 1984 issue of *Micro Adventures* to claim that “it’s much easier to kill the nasty little creep to begin with” (Jones 5). Nearly three decades later, this sentiment is alive and well in GameFAQ’s 2013 walkthrough guide, which states “unlike the book, it is recommended to kill Gollum when you see him” and, barring that, “to just leave him instead of trying to answer [his riddles]” (Davis 1.01).

²⁷ In his 1840 essay “A Defense of Poetry,” Shelley claims that “poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man” in that “it awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought” (596). Writing decades earlier, Samuel Taylor Coleridge argued something similar albeit less specific to poetry in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), in which he describes the imagination as something which “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create. . . it is essentially *vital* even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead” (586, emphasis original). For a more contemporary discussion of the power of poetry and metaphor to change one’s perception, see Jay Parini’s *Why Poetry Matters* (2009).

²⁸ While any study which includes multiple adaptations of the same text – from Stam’s discussions of transcultural *Robinson Crusoe* adaptations in *Literature through Film* (2005) to many of the contributors in Horton and McDougal’s collection *Play it Again, Sam: Retakes on Remakes* (1998) – the tendency to view film adaptations as responding to previous film

adaptations (rather than the source itself) is particularly prevalent in perennially re-told canonical sources. Consider, for example, Pedro Javier Pardo Garcia's reading of Kenneth Branagh's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994) as being revisions on previous versions of Shelley's novel or Suzanne R. Black's study of interrelated Sherlock Holmes adaptations in her 2012 *Forum* article "The Archontic Holmes."

²⁹ The wardrobe for Darcy has included riding boots in several screen sequels including Hollywood's 2005 film and Guy Andrews' *Lost in Austen* (2008) (the latter of which also contains a swimming scene), and romance author Linda Berdoll admitted in a 2012 interview that "a photo of Colin Firth as Mr. Darcy atop Mr. Darcy's horse (wearing Mr. Darcy's tall boots) has been my steadfast muse. If I need inspiration – there it is!" (Austenesque Reviews).

³⁰ Tracy Fullerton's *Game Design Workshop*, for example, presents game systems in terms of abstract objects, properties, behaviors, and relationships (112), while Jesse Schell describes the same elements as objects, attributes, and states in *Game Design: A Book of Lenses* (136). While neither of these authors use the term "abstraction" explicitly in this context, both of their texts include multiple examples of abstracting real-world phenomena into these game elements – Fullerton's chapters on conceptualization and prototyping contain a sequence of exercises that take readers through this process, while Schell breaks down the "essential experience" of a snowball fight into a hypothetical game in his second chapter (20).

³¹ Although the terms "property" and "method" are not universal labels for these concepts, I use them here for the sake of accessibility. For more on the technical end of object-oriented languages discussed here, see Kim B. Bruce's *Foundations of Object-Oriented Languages: Types and Semantics* (2002)

³² The concept of an individual audience member's unique vision of a fictional character, story, or world (one that is sometimes at odds with "official" sources) is sometimes referred to "headcanon" within fanfiction discourse. The entry for the term in Moonbeam's Fanfiction Terminology notes that "while not officially supported by the canon [i.e. original textual sources of a fictional world], [headcanon] tends also not to be actually *disproven* or refuted by the canon and will therefore seem plausible in the mind of the fan who imagines it. Headcanons are as many and varied as the fans themselves, may be about the past, present, or future of the character or plot, and can be shared by others if particularly enticing or believable" (Moonbeam). While there is thus certainly resonance between the creation of headcanon and the process of abstraction as I define it here, untangling the nuances between these terms (especially when it comes to the complex questions of "fidelity" to "canonical" works within particular fandoms) lies outside of the scope of this project.

³³ One notable game adaptation of Austen's work that I do not mention here is the ambitious project *Ever, Jane* (3 Turn Productions, 2016-2020) which was meant to be a massively multiplayer online roleplaying game in which players could be characters in a fictionalized version of Austen's Regency England. Although a beta version of the game was released to the public in August 2016, it did not gain a large following, and the game's development team officially shuttered the project in December 2020 (3 Turn Productions 2021). Though a discussion of why *Good Society* worked and *Ever, Jane* did not would be potentially fascinating (especially considering their appeal to similar demographics, their similar premises, and their original sources of funding), doing so would require more space than I can allot in this project.

³⁴ In his work *Man, Play, and Games* (1961), Roger Caillois ascribes the term “make-believe” to all games, signifying how they are “accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or free unreality, as against real life” (10). While he argues even the most rule-bound games contain this “make-believe” element to some extent – and, conversely, even the most “unstructured” games contain some sort of rules – he attempts to classify games according to where they fall on the spectrum between the two extremes of *paidia* (an “uncontrolled fantasy” characterized by “diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety”) and *ludus* (“arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions” which require “effort, patience, skill, or ingenuity to navigate”) (13). While the distinction is not particularly useful to this chapter, one could think of *Good Society* as being closer to *paidia* than classic, rule-based tabletop roleplaying games like *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974), just as the TTRPG genre in general is more *paidaic* than conventional *ludic* games like chess.

³⁵ Interestingly enough, the abstraction-centric genre of tabletop roleplaying games can trace its roots back to approximately the same time in which Austen was writing her novels. According to Jon Peterson’s history of TTRPGs in *Playing at the World* (2012), the prehistory of the genre begins with a Prussian junior army officer by the name of George Heinrich Rudolf Johann von Reisswitz, who developed a tactical dice-based wargame known simply as *Kriegsspiel* in 1824. *Kriegsspiel* built upon the chess-based war simulations developed by von Reisswitz’s father, utilizing topographically accurate maps and a variety of real-world unit formations to enhance the realism of any given virtual battle. The game was played between two players or teams and presided over by an umpire, who would determine the starting scenario and goals for each side as well as carry out the written orders players would give to their troops by physically moving them across the board. Unlike in previous chess-based war games where units

could be taken by simply landing on another's space, the umpire would determine the outcome of any engagement by rolling dice to determine things like number of casualties and an attack's effect on soldier morale. Units could therefore suffer partial losses and still fight on at limited capacity, better simulating the behavior of a real-world battalion. Rather than playing out pre-scripted historical battles or symmetrical chess-like games on stagnant boards, the codification of rules by which specific units could operate and interact with each other allowed for players to simulate many conceivable strategic scenarios with a single ruleset. The king of Prussia was so impressed with von Reisswitz's game that he ordered every regiment receive a *Kriegsspiel* set for training purposes, and by the end of the 19th century militaries across Europe had some form of wargaming tradition. It began making its way into civilian life, surprisingly, through the work of a few prominent British writers: Robert Lewis Stevenson apparently developed his own unpublished rules for the hobby in the 1880s (see Peterson 16), and H.G. Wells' *Little Wars* (1912) made wargaming accessible to a younger crowd.

³⁶ Using the term "adaptation" to refer to the artistic depiction of real-world events is provocative on its surface – what is a historical narrative but the curation of evidence into a palatable, often entertaining form? Both documentaries and literature-to-film adaptations bear witness to the impossibility of "true" fidelity to their sources, and each are shaped by the interpretations of their creators and users. Ultimately, however, such a conflation renders "adaptation" useless, as truly *any* piece of media (narrative or not) that depicts or is inspired by something outside of itself – i.e. just about every piece of art – would be an "adaptation." Besides, as described repeatedly throughout this project, "adaptation" (like "game") is more useful as a perspective on an object rather than an ontological statement. This is why the

previous sentence claims that war games can be said to “*function as* game adaptations” in this context rather than *be* game adaptations.

³⁷ While I have chosen to retain the masculine pronouns within Featherstone’s original wording here, it is important to note that he is far from alone in describing the appeal of wargaming in masculine terms. The subtitle of the first widely printed civilian wargame manual, H.G. Wells’s 1912 *Little Wars* (see note 8), bills the text as “a game for boys from twelve years of age to one hundred and fifty and for that more intelligent sort of girl who likes boys' games and books,” and the first page adds that “a few rare and gifted women” might also find it appealing (Wells 1). This sort of misogyny has bled into the TTRPG space as well, building on the misogyny of sci-fi and fantasy fan cultures more generally: Gary Allen Fine’s study of TTRPG culture in *Shared Fantasy* (1983) describes the relative lack of female players in the hobby (64) as well as some players’ tendency to use it as an excuse to indulge in rape fantasies (69). Unfortunately, while the hobby has become more diverse in the 21st century, practices like these are all too common: multiple female players have attested to having to navigate misogyny, harassment, and even sexual violence within the male-dominated space of tabletop gaming. See Emily Garland’s 2016 Tumblr Post “Tabletop Gaming has a White Male Terrorism Problem” and the fallout it gave rise to as discussed in an article by Vox’s Aja Romano.

³⁸ The term for the individual who narrates a TTRPG session and designs obstacles for the player characters varies widely across time and game system. Possible titles have included: “Referee” (*Dungeons and Dragons*’s seminal 1974 edition), “Dungeon Master” or DM (*Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*, 1979 and every edition of *D&D* since), “Storyteller” (White Wolf’s 1991 *Vampire: The Masquerade* and its sequels), and even MC (Son of Oak’s *City of*

Mist, 2016). I use the more generic term “Game Master” or GM here as a way to refer to the role is at applies throughout the genre.

³⁹ Indeed, one could argue that the long arm of TTRPG development has been moving towards more narrative experiences over challenging ones since at least the mid-90s with the release of White Wolf Publishing’s *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1997), which required players to connect their characters to a complicated swath of original lore and includes things such as “Virtues” and “Background” explicitly on its character sheet (259). Other TTRPGs, like Son of Oak’s noirish *City of Mist* (2017), contain fewer mechanics associated with combat systems and more involving how player characters can dig up information, parse out clues, and develop organically or emotionally rather than progress in mechanical power levels. Even the most recent edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* – the Fifth Edition, as of this writing – has done away with many of its complex mechanics in favor of encouraging storytelling and roleplay. Despite all of this change, however, the three core attributes described here (as well as a focus on combat and adventure) remain standard among most TTRPGs to date.

⁴⁰ Though the original manuscript of the text that would become *Pride and Prejudice* (aptly named *First Impressions*) has been lost to time, scholars such as Brian C. Southam have theorized the text was originally conceived of as an entirely epistolary novel. Though it lies outside of the bounds of this chapter, William Galperin suggests that the “silence” of the early epistolary drafts of *Pride and Prejudice* is echoed in Austen’s style of narration (see Galperin 20-24).

⁴¹ The differences between studying a text’s “media behaviors” and studying it as an adaptation as I do in this project deserves some further explanation. In Goode’s words, a media behavior is “a population or pattern of medial alterations or invocations of a text that, though

typically advancing a disparate range of interpretations and political projects as a population, nevertheless use a common medium, deliver a similar sensory experience, share a mode of user participation, and/or involve the same kind of transmission. A media behavior amounts to a culturally demonstrated availability of a text to remediation in a particular way” (8). While this project’s focus on how game forms bring to light certain aspects of an adapted text certainly resonates with (and in some way builds on) Goode’s focus on media behaviors, my methodology and conclusions necessarily differs due to matters of scale. Whereas Goode’s compelling points about the place-making potentials of Austen’s texts are drawn from the study of a wide array of fanfiction, there are simply not enough Austenian roleplaying games (or, really, similar Austen games of all kinds) to justify the argument that Austen’s corpus has been ‘medially hailed’ by the TTRPG. Instead, while the argument here (and, indeed, throughout this project) follows Goode in asking “How might a text’s behavior in a later time and place. . .actualize existing textual and cultural potentials” (4), its focus on individual textual interpretation over repeated media behaviors aligns it with “the newest versions of formalist literary scholarship” that Goode explicitly separates himself from (2). Even still, the tendency of games (as constructed systems) to lend themselves to formal readings aligns them with Goode’s methodology as they both exist in the grey area between the discourses of media studies and textual scholarship.

⁴² It must be noted that the Player’s Handbook for the 5th edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* (from which this character sheet is taken) does give GMs the option to award mechanical bonuses to players who act according to their personality traits, ideals, bonds, and flaws listed in the cells on their character sheet (Crawford et. al. 125). While this does show a general shift in both the 5th edition and the hobby in general away from its combat-centric wargaming roots and towards collaborative storytelling (a trend epitomized by *Good Society*),

this new development does not outweigh the combat-centric and quantitative design of the traditional TTRPG model. In practice, these cells are often left blank.

⁴³ The term “game theory” here should not be confused with “game studies;” the latter is the humanistic study of games as cultural artifacts, while the former is a subset of economics that aims to model rational decision making. The “games” of “game theory” are hypothetical or real-world scenarios in which “players” have preferences that can be numerically represented, while the “games” of “games studies” are actual board games, card games, digital games, and/or playground games or sports. The goal of economic game theory is, as Chwe suggests, to create predictive models for human behavior, while the “goal” of games studies is to better understand the way that actual games operate within culture. For the sake of clarity, I have generally avoided the term “game theory” in the following analysis of Chwe’s work in favor of “strategic thinking,” which is an integral aspect of both types of games and is at the crux of his analysis of Austen.

⁴⁴ I want to be clear that “justifiably” refers to the *point made* by such critiques, and not the critiques themselves: William Deresiewicz’s 2014 polemic against Chwe’s book in *The New Republic* (entitled “Nonsense and Sensibility”) reads very much like the knee-jerk reaction of a scholar against a disciplinary outsider who (wrongly, in my view) took Chwe’s book as one of the many ways in which “science undertakes to tutor the humanities” (45). This concern appears in other reviews as well, as when John Mullan somewhat bizarrely states that “Chwe’s colleagues in his university’s English department will be relieved that he does get things wrong” in his 2013 review in *The Guardian*. While I agree that Chwe’s attempts to bring Austen into scientific discourses is somewhat strained and unconvincing at times (he veers into a discussion of the US attack on Fallujah in his final chapter [211]), his readings of strategic thinking

displayed in Austen's work are provocative. It is also worth noting that both authors agree with me in their own ways, acknowledging that "Chwe has described something that does indeed make Austen's novels complex and satisfying" (Mullan), even if the fact that Austen "believed that reason should govern our conduct. . . is the pretty much the most obvious thing about her work" (Deresiewicz 45).

⁴⁵ I draw from *Pride and Prejudice* here in order to reduce the amount of Austen texts cited here to a minimum, and in hopes that readers will be more likely to understand these references than others. Chwe himself has examples for each of these innovations from almost every Austen novel and is rather thorough in his descriptions. See Chwe Chapter 9.

⁴⁶ For more theorizations on "immersion" within game studies, see Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's concept of the "immediate" in *Remediation* (1999) Marie-Laure Ryan's taxonomy of different types of immersion in *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2* (2015), Jamie Madigan's psychological reading of immersive spaces in *Getting Gamers: The Psychology of Video Games* (2019), or the practical breakdowns presented by designers like Ernest W. Adams (2004).

⁴⁷ I borrow the term "immediacy" here from Bolter and Grusin, referring to an interface that is meant to appear natural or invisible, minimizing the distance between the medium (in this case, the computer) and what it represents (in this case, Walden Pond) (30). Thoreau's writing, by contrast, could be said to follow what Bolter and Grusin call the "logic of hypermediacy" as the place he is representing is overtly mediated through his musings, philosophies, and sometimes tangential prose (41). While Bolter and Grusin discuss these as strictly visual strategies, Marie Laure-Ryan's *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2* applies similar logics across verbal and interactive media. This usage is informed by both perspectives.

⁴⁸ This same principle of an aesthetic concept being visible when it is broken also applies to the “uncanny valley,” first used by roboticist Masahiro Mori to describe the eerie feeling of encountering an automaton that is too unnatural be human, but too realistic to be completely abstract. See Mori, 1970.

⁴⁹ Other games in the “survival game” genre include *Don’t Starve* (Klei Entertainment 2014), *The Long Dark* (Hinterland Studio 2015), and *Minecraft*’s “Survival Mode” (Mojang 2011).

⁵⁰ It is interesting to note that in order to comply with the requirements of their respective digital storefronts, the console versions of *Walden, a game* (for Xbox One and Playstation 4) do actually contain in-game achievements that players may complete to gain prestige in the social networks associated with both consoles (“Gamerscore” and “trophies,” respectively). Some of these achievements include “Sojourner” (achieved by walking 50 miles), “Townie” (spending at least one hour in Concord), and “Journal Keeper” (filling in 100 entries in one’s journal) (Mookiethebold). While such paratextual extrinsic motivators do call the game’s sense of contemplation into question for those particular versions, the game’s general design and the absence of such mechanics in the originally released PC version of the game are still oriented toward a reflective game experience.

⁵¹ *Walden, a game* is not the only digital game in which progress is largely based on an external game clock, of course; many survival games (see note 49) feature day/night cycles, forcing players to prioritize tasks before the (often dangerous) nights fall. Outside of this, Twisted Tree’s *Proteus* (2013), a contemplative experience similar to *Walden, a game*, requires that the player wait until in-game “night” for a portal to appear that will progress them to the next stage. Nintendo’s *Animal Crossing* series (2001-2020) even requires players to wait for real

world days for letters to be sent, crops to grow, and for villagers to move in and out of town. For more on time in games, see Christopher Hanson's *Game Time: Understanding Temporality in Video Games* (2018).

⁵² For more on the discomfoting sense of silence that early sound films created, see Robert Spadoni's *Uncanny Bodies: The Coming of Sound Film and the Origins of the Horror Genre* (2007).

Gameography

Animal Crossing. Developed by Nintendo, Nintendo Gamecube, 2001.

Canabalt. Designed by Adam Saltzman, Semi-Secret Software, Multiple Platforms, 2009.

Castlevania. Developed by Konami, Nintendo Entertainment System, 1987.

City of Mist. Designed by Amit Moshe, Son of Oak Game Studio, tabletop game, 2018.

Colossal Cave Adventure. Developed by William Crowther, PDP-10, 1975.

Dallas: The Television Roleplaying Game. Developed by Simulations Publications, tabletop game, 1980.

Don't Starve. Developed by Klei Entertainment, PC, 2014.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Developed by Advance Communication Company, Nintendo Entertainment System, 1988.

Dune II: The Battle for Arrakis. Developed by Westwood Studios, MS-DOS, 1992.

Dungeons and Dragons. Designed by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, Tactical Studies Rules, tabletop game, 1974.

Dungeons and Dragons: Fifth Edition. Wizards of the Coast, tabletop game, 2014.

Elsinore. Developed by Golden Glitch Studios, PC, 2019.

E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial. Developed by Atari, Atari 2600, 1982.

Ever, Jane. 3 Turn Productions, PC, 2016.

Fighting Fantasy. Puffin Books, designed by Steve Jackson and Ian Livingston, Gamebook series, 1982-1995.

Flash Gordon and the Warriors of Mongo. Developed by Fantasy Games Unlimited, tabletop game, 1977.

Good Society: A Jane Austen Roleplaying Game. Designed by Hayley Gordon and Vee Hendro, Storybrewers Roleplaying, tabletop game, 2018.

Grand Theft Auto. Developed by Rockstar Games, Various Platforms, 1997.

Hamlet! A Game in Five Acts. Developed by Interactivities Inc, tabletop game, 2002.

Hamlet, or the Last Game without MMORPG Features, Shaders and Product Placement.
Developed by Denis Galanin, PC, 2010.

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Vita

John Sanders was born and raised in Eagle River, Alaska, but decided to travel to the East coast for college. His interest in game studies was piqued during his time as an undergraduate student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he earned dual Bachelors of Arts degrees in Comparative Literature with a focus in Religious Studies and a self-directed major in Game Design Pedagogy and Digital Humanities Scholarship through the university's Bachelor's Degree with Individualized Concentration (BDIC) program. Upon his graduation in 2015, John attended Syracuse University to pursue a Doctor of Philosophy degree in English with a concentration in Film and Screen Studies. His work has appeared in journals such as *gamevironments* and *First-Person Scholar* as well as in presentations at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference, the Literature/Film Association conference, and PAX East. Outside of academia, John has worked as a curriculum designer, site director, and instructor for International Ivy Summer Programs, where he designs and teaches classes in animation, game design, and worldbuilding. He currently resides in Denville, New Jersey with his partner Noelle and their three dogs: Simon, Henry, and Mr. Darcy.