

A TALE OF TWO PLEASURES?: PLAYING VIDEOGAME NARRATIVES

By

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To my Mom, who gave me life and love; and to my Wife, who makes me love my life.

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I thank my mother and grandmother, both strong women who struggled to make things better for their children. I thank my wife, who has helped me be a better person. I thank my supervisory committee for helping me achieve an academic goal that my family was not sure I would reach.

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
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This study examines what kinds of narrative content gets incorporated into videogames, and how the tensions that arise when trying to combine narrative and game are resolved. The underlying axiom of this text is that we can and should see many videogames as simultaneously narratives and games, because a proper understanding of either quality in narrative-driven videogames necessitates a consideration of both. The overarching thesis of this text is that for the tensions between the demands of a game and the demands of a narrative to be resolved, their underlying structures must be harmonized by aligning the restrictions and requirements of both forms.

When these tensions are resolved, the result is a videogame narrative—a videogame in which narrative and game elements are integrated at the level of their production with the intent of simultaneously evoking both narrative scripts and setting up the artificial conflicts that form the basis of game-play. This work examines how various types of videogame narratives balance the competing demands of narrative and game on players, and how they succeed in engaging players in the dual pleasures of being a part of a narrative and playing a game.

CHAPTER 1
THE VIDEOGAME AS A NARRATIVE MEDIUM

The Growing Appeal of Videogames

The first time I played a videogame was in 1981. I was four years old. I remember going to my neighbor's house, a boy a little older than me, who asked if I wanted to play *Pong*. I asked him what *Pong* was, and he showed me a plastic box with wood paneling connected to the television. I am not sure which of the many *Pong* systems it was, but my best guess now is that it was a five year old Tele-Games Super PONG machine. The system did not have a slot for cartridges. It did not need one, because it only played one game—*Pong*. I was very excited about playing it, but when he booted it up, it did not look very impressive—just a vertical line down the center of the screen, one shorter line on the far left, and another on the far right. He gave me one of two detachable controllers with a knob on it, explained that I could move the “paddle” on the right up and down by turning the knob on my controller to block the square “ball” that bounced across the screen, and proceeded to crush me at several games, before I got bored of losing and the tedious blipping sound and wanted to go outside.

Videogames have come a long way since then. In 2005, video and computer games grossed over \$7 billion in the United States. Taking into account hardware as well as software sales, this figure rises to a staggering \$10.5 billion for videogames alone, and another \$1.4 billion for computer game sales and subscription services (NPD). Remarkable numbers, to be sure, but no longer shocking to most people. While their sales figures are more impressive than they were a couple of decades ago, videogames (which I will use as the umbrella term for all console, PC, and handheld games from here on out)¹ have been big business for years. Today,

¹ Though there are important differences between games played on home consoles, games played on handheld devices, and games played on PCs, throughout this work, I have chosen to use the term *videogame* to refer to games played on all platforms. Some writers prefer *computer game* as the more inclusive term that rightly emphasizes the

one need only visit a major retail store to see not only children but adult men and women enthralled in play at videogame kiosks occupying videogame retail spaces that are growing in size every year. By now, even people who do not play videogames understand that they are a hugely popular and culturally significant form of entertainment.

Most people recognize that videogames are popular, but many do not understand why they are so popular. What is it about videogames that makes them compelling? Why have they grown from a relative niche market of young male gamers to a market where the average gamer is now 33 years old and women 18 and over represent a greater portion of the gaming population (30%) than boys 17 or younger (23%) (ESA)? Certainly, such an expansion and diversification of the gaming demographic has not stemmed solely from the much discussed visceral appeal of controlling brutal and increasingly naturalistic violent actions, as anti-gaming crusaders would have us believe.² Many videogames contain violent content, as do other entertainment media. But it is not just, nor even primarily, primal button-mashing equaling on-screen eye-gashing that compels the ever-expanding gaming audience to open their hearts and their wallets to play and pay again and again. The main reason videogames have maintained and extended their popularity over the last couple of decades has been the continued expansion and refinement of the medium, which has gone hand in hand with stronger, more compelling narrative content. *A Tale of Two Pleasures? Playing Videogame Narratives* examines what kind of narrative content

number-crunching aspect of the technology, but *videogame* is the more widely used inclusive term in the industry, popular press, and among scholars. For most, including me, this is less a conscious semantic choice than it is an acknowledgement of that fact that game software on consoles dominates the gaming industry as a whole, outselling their PC/Mac and handheld counterparts by wide margins.

² This is not to suggest that controlling violent situations is not one of the healthy pleasures videogames afford players. As Gerard Jones effectively argues in his book *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes, and Make-Believe Violence*, playing violent videogames is very often a therapeutic way of dealing with the lack of control and power that we have in our everyday lives (165-182).

gets incorporated into videogames, and how the tensions that arise when trying to combine narrative and game are resolved.

Though it could be argued that we are still in a nascent stage of videogame evolution, there is no denying that videogames have already developed a great deal in a short amount of time. Continued advances in technology have given developers the ability to represent objects in increasing detail. The days of my first *Pong* experience are long gone. Gone is the square monochrome block bouncing with no sound or monotone blips off of monochrome lines (Figure 1-1). In its place, we have the high definition naturalism of Rockstar's³ *Table Tennis*, in which you can see the sweat pouring down the highly detailed faces of the players, hear their grunts and the cheers of the crowd, and feel the ball hitting the paddle through vibrations in the controller (Figure 1-2). Over the years, videogames have progressed from a necessarily abstract and simplistic representational medium to an increasingly naturalistic and sophisticated one.

It is amazing how far videogame technology has progressed over the course of a couple of decades, but perhaps just as amazing is that a growing number of players have access to the most state-of-the-art videogames right in their homes. Pushed in no small part by the gaming industry itself, home computer technology has advanced rapidly, shifting videogames from the public spaces of arcades into millions of homes across the country. This movement from public into private spaces is the most significant factor in the expansion of videogames. Its success is proven by the gaudy sales numbers already outlined and the near extinction of the once thriving arcade business.

One of the major reasons for the success of the home videogame business is the increased versatility the transition into the home allows. From a technological standpoint, one of the main

³ Yes, the same Rockstar that makes the infamous *Grand Theft Auto* series. In fact, the engine that powers their *Table Tennis* game will be used to power *GTA IV*.

advantages of home video consoles, dating back as early as the 1976 release of the Fairchild Channel F, is the ability of one piece of hardware to play many games purchased separately. This enables publishers to put out as many games as they think people will buy, at a relatively small cost in relation to the initial hardware purchase. While this means that many arcade style games can be played on a single console in living rooms and bedrooms across the country, it has also led to the development and refinement of new videogame genres.

Game publishers have sought to expand their market by providing videogame players with a broader range of play experiences. Once home consoles established themselves, game developers quickly realized that they did not need to optimize their games to be played in short, exciting episodes of play fitted to the insertion of more quarters, and for keeping the attention of adolescents standing in front of one game machine while surrounded by the sights and sounds of dozens of other competing machines. Videogames were developed that could engage players for longer periods of time than were possible in the loud, frantic, quarter-popping atmosphere of the arcade. One of the main ways this was accomplished was through the development of longer, stronger, more central, narratives in videogames.

Though most videogames have always had, even in the arcade era, narrative elements, the shift from arcades into homes allowed for much greater narrative refinement in videogames. The combination of ludic and narrative desires proved compelling indeed, and gave the home market an increased edge over its arcade counterpart. Home videogame consoles have been around for about as long as arcades. However, videogames in the home eventually caught up and surpassed their arcade counterparts in popularity in large part due to the ability to play both games like *Ms. Pac-Man* and *Donkey Kong*, and the ability to play new, more complex, narrative-driven games like *The Legend of Zelda* and *Final Fantasy*, which would have been impractical in an arcade

setting, where players are surrounded by the distracting sounds of players playing other games around them and would be uncomfortable standing for long periods of time without being able to pause the game to go to the bathroom or eat.

In what has been a gradual process of establishing conventions and innovating them over time, several videogame genres—adventure, action, and role-playing games among the most prominent—have emerged that frequently offer compelling narratives at the core of their experiences. The extent of the importance of having a compelling narrative in a videogame varies across and even within genres, but overall, the ability to play videogames in environments without the distractions of the arcade and the ability to save one’s progress in the game has led to narrative taking a more central role in videogames. From an industry standpoint, this move is hardly surprising. The potential profitability of combining our two most ubiquitous and ancient forms of entertainment and enculturation makes mixing stories and games inevitable.

The move seems to have paid off for both the industry and for consumers, but it has also led to consternation among many in the videogame industry who must grapple with how exactly to intertwine game and narrative elements in new, more engaging ways. Both games and narratives tap into deep and powerful desires for meaning, control, and progress, but they do so in different ways and combining them effectively is difficult. Some videogame and literary scholars question whether it is worth the effort, and argue over what extent mixing games with stories is pleasurable and ultimately possible.

It’s a Duck! It’s a Rabbit!

Combining a narrative with a game is no easy task. For many, the undertaking is perceived to be as difficult and desirable as breeding a duck and a rabbit. For instance, Greg Costikyan, a game designer and theorist, has stated that “[t]here is a direct, immediate conflict between the demands of a story and the demands of a game. Divergence from a story’s path is

likely to make for a less satisfactory story; restricting a player's freedom of action is likely to make for a less satisfying game" (Costikyan 44). There is no denying that successfully integrating a story and a game is difficult, and for various reasons, some are highly critical of the endeavor. Despite strong market indicators showing the desire for videogame narratives, criticism of combining game and story elements continues to come from industry insiders as well as game scholars and literary scholars. Ironically, both game and narrative purists see the combination as a bad one for their side.

On the side of game developers, often the difficulties and limitations of combining narrative and game elements are seen as more trouble than they are worth. John Carmack, co-founder of Id Software, and lead programmer of Id games such as *Wolfenstein 3D*, *Quake*, and *Doom* and their sequels, has said that "a story in a game is like a story in a porn movie; it's expected to be there, but it's not that important" (Kushner 128). This sentiment is reflected in the level of narrative development in Id's first person shooter games, which are typically unsurpassed from a technical standpoint and offer non-stop, adrenaline pumping action, but do not bother much with coherent plots. Id's shooters were fantastically popular in the 1990s. Their more recent games, however, have not fared quite as well, suggesting diminishing interest in games with minimal story elements.

The 1998 release of *Half-Life* raised the bar in terms of player expectations for a story in a single player FPS. *Half-Life* was wildly successful and universally praised by critics and players alike in large part because of the unprecedented consistency and coherency of its engaging and immersive narrative (Figure 1-3). The FPS genre, which is dominated by violence and fast-paced action, does not always need to have a strong narrative.⁴ However, a case for

⁴ While a strong narrative with a compelling plot and interesting characters is a deciding factor in the success of single-player progress oriented games, it plays less of a role in determining the success of multiplayer games where

integrating narrative and game, as difficult a task as it may be, is made with the success of narrative-driven FPS's. Sales figures in the twenty-first century suggest that even when the primary action required of players involves shooting others, players prefer performing these actions in a detailed, coherent fictional world where their characters move through a plot.⁵

Some people feel that this success, however, is based on little more than novelty. Former game design author Chris Crawford has long held the belief that trying to provide a compelling narrative experience within the confines of a videogame is a severely limiting and ultimately unfulfilling proposition. His alternative, an interactive storytelling system he calls Storytronics, has been in development for over 15 years, with no tangible product yet available to the public (Murdey). In the meantime, videogame players have had to content themselves with playing hundreds of videogames that center around rich, engaging stories. But Crawford is not alone in his criticism of the shallowness and ineffectiveness of combining narrative and game elements. Videogame scholar Steven Poole points out that most videogames that incorporate a synchronic story do so through cut-scenes, and the player of such games then becomes merely a passive watcher rather than an active participant.⁶ As Poole puts it, “[cut-scenes] signal a discontinuous break between game playing, which has no story to speak of, and watching, which bears all the narrative load. In general the player runs around fighting, solving puzzles and exploring new areas, and once a certain amount of game-play is completed, he is rewarded with a narrative

the emphasis is on level design, weaponry, and balance of forces. Like a well designed board game, such as Chess, these games succeed because of their replayability, not their dependence on evoking narrative desires for plot progression. Perhaps the best example of this is *Counter-Strike*, which, for years, was the most widely played first person shooter in the world. It maintained an avid following for years because it offers a compelling multiplayer experience, not because it has a compelling narrative (ironically, it began as a total conversion modification of *Half-Life*, which is often cited as redefining the FPS and raising the bar on narrative quality for FPS's).

⁵ Peter Brooks, in *Reading for the Plot*, puts forth a compelling argument that the desire for plot progression is the primary trait of texts that compels readers to continue to read.

⁶ The synchronic story for Poole is the now of the story—the story that progresses as you play the game—and is contrasted with the back-story, or diachronic story.

sequence that is set in stone by the designer” (96). Poole asserts that the connection between these elements is arbitrary: “it is as if you were reading a novel and forced by some jocund imp at the end of each chapter to win a game of table tennis before being allowed to get back to the story...[or] it’s the other way around: you really want a good exciting game of Ping-Pong, but you have to read every time you win a game” (96). There are game players who would agree with Poole, especially when they play videogames that do little more than oscillate between a game and a story, as some games continue to do even today after innovations in the medium have shown that more is possible. Some videogames do little more than what Poole describes, because doing more requires more effort. However, as I shall explore in this work, many videogames do integrate narrative and game to the point where players feel they are playing through a story.

The extent to which videogames succeed in combining a narrative experience with the interactive qualities of a game is precisely why many literary scholars rail against videogames. There are those who detest the idea of giving authorial control over to players, and shudder at what they think of as the dehumanization of the storytelling process. For years, neo-luddites such as Sven Birkerts have lamented the fate of fiction in the computer age. Many literary scholars and bibliophiles continue to express their eschatological fears of videogames, viewing them with a mixture of bemusement, disgust, and fear, plaintive about the degradation of culture and the fine art of literary narrative as many—far too many they would say—are spending more time with videogames and less time with books. They express these fears, interestingly, despite continued strong book sale numbers which indicate that videogames are not killing off the printed word.

Most of the criticism and anxiety surrounding the combinations of narrative and game elements in videogames boils down to matters of perspective and control. From an industry standpoint, the debate often revolves around who should have control over the narrative content in a game, how best to integrate the narrative with the game-play, and how meaningful the narrative is to the end product's sales. From a scholarly standpoint, for many, it comes down to the questions of who should study, how they should study, and to what ends should they study videogames. For years, the heart of this latter debate manifested itself as a contentious contest between narratologists and ludologists.⁷ Narratologists see videogames as narrative objects and want to study them using tools developed for the analysis of other narrative media while ludologists see videogames as games with minor or no significant narrative elements and want to develop new tools to study them as distinct from narrative objects. Game scholar Markku Eskelinen has gone so far as to staunchly insist that “[i]t should be self-evident that we can’t apply print narratology, hypertext theory, film or theater and drama studies directly to computer games” (Eskelinen 36). Many scholars on both sides are now conceding, however, that this is not really an either/or proposition. New media scholar Nick Monfort says of the definitional back and forth that “[a]sking whether a new media artifact is a story or a game is like asking of a poem: “Which is it? Narrative or metrical?...a dichotomy distracting with its false opposition” (Monfort 310). Just like the famous duck-rabbit optical illusion, a videogame can be seen as both a narrative and a game. The trick is, can we see it as both at the same time?

⁷ The *ludologists* are a group calling for the establishment of an independent field of game studies—*ludology*. Though evidence of the term can be traced back farther, in its present usage in games studies, the term was coined by Gonzalo Frasca in his essay: “Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and Differences Between (Video)Games and Narrative.”

The underlying axiom of this text is that we can and should see many videogames as comprised of or oriented by both narrative (story) and non-narrative (game) elements, because a proper understanding of either quality in narrative-driven videogames necessitates a consideration of both. That is not to say that we could not, if we wished, extract the narrative of a videogame from its proper play context and read it as we would a script of a movie or play. In fact, for those videogames that rely primarily on pre-scripted narrative content, officially released and fan generated scripts are readily available online. For some games, we could go one step further and take out all the cut-scenes of a game, stitch them together, and watch them as we would a movie. The critically acclaimed videogame *Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence* includes a bonus disc with the game that does just that (though watching this patchwork movie is a far different experience than playing the game itself). Doing this would make things easier for narrative theorists and game theorists alike since the narrative could be analyzed separately from the game, and such an analysis would, perhaps, not be without merit. In fact, such an approach is taken in many literature classrooms where plays such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are read silently just as one would read a prose fiction narrative. This is not, however, the analytical strategy taken in this text.

This text examines what it means to *play* a videogame narrative. This requires dealing with the tension between the narrative and the game that often does exist. Addressing this tension is at the core of *A Tale of Two Pleasures? Playing Videogame Narratives*, as is obvious from the title. I argue that while it is fair to say that the narrative of a videogame is sometimes distinct from or even at odds with the play elements of that game, it is often more accurate to describe their relationship as a cooperative one in which both narrative and game-play contribute to the overall pleasure of the experience for players. Narrative and game may not always be a perfect

marriage, but their union can be a fulfilling and harmonious one if game designers and game players wish for it to be.

The results of such a union are playful and engaging narrative experiences that are different from those offered in other narrative media. This makes studying videogame narratives important for two main reasons. First, as cognitive psychologist Gavriel Salomon puts it, “media are our cultural apparatus for selecting, gathering, storing, and conveying knowledge in representational forms (Salomon 3). Second, as Johann Huizinga reminded us about games and Jean-François Lyotard has pointed out about narrative, both games and narratives are fundamentally important to how we know and experience the world.⁸ Narratives provide a context within which we live and games allow us to safely practice being in and stepping out of this context; both games and narratives are vehicles of ideology, tools of education, and universal forms of entertainment. Narrative is, as Barthes has said, everywhere: “[it] is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself” (Barthes 79). The same can be said for games. Therefore, understanding how narrative and game come together in the medium of the videogame is crucial to our understanding of who we are and how we express ourselves.

As already suggested, the combination of narrative and game is one of the main reasons why the videogame is one of the largest growing entertainment media worldwide. The inclusive, recombinatory nature of videogames is emblematic of the sort of changes wrought by digital media in general to our transmittal of “knowledge in representational forms.” The cultural significance of videogames extends far beyond the boundaries of the many studies of the effects of media violence on today’s youth. They are not simply or even most importantly vehicles of violent content, nor are they a novelty or passing fad. They are an ever-growing cultural force

⁸ The word *narrative* comes from the Latin *gnarus*, which means knowing or to know. For a more extensive examination of this subject see Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.

that needs to be taken seriously and studied thoroughly. Part of this study needs to involve how many videogames are both games and narratives simultaneously, and that is the central goal of this text.

The Game Plan

My goals for this project are simple to state, but difficult to achieve. I aim to analyze videogame narratives in unprecedented scope and detail. Of course, no text can offer an exhaustive or definitive study of videogame narratives, and this impossible task is not promised in the pages that follow. *A Tale of Two Pleasures? Playing Videogame Narratives* does not cover all of the elements of narrative in all types of videogames, but it does attempt to provide a thorough introduction to what I identify as *videogame narratives*. Videogame narratives are videogames in which narrative and game elements are integrated at the level of their production with the intent of simultaneously evoking both narrative scripts and setting up the artificial conflicts that form the basis of game-play; furthermore, videogame narratives must be capable of achieving this intent at the level of their reception. Though narrative elements are present in nearly all genres of videogames, in many cases, the narrative is encountered by the player primarily before play begins and remains at the periphery of the overall play experience. In many other cases, however, a narrative is purposefully and thoughtfully crafted within the structure of the game, and playing through such a game can feel as though one is playing through a narrative experience that drives the game forward. Examining these interactive narrative experiences is the aim of this text, but doing so is no small task. It requires several methods.

Because this is a humanities based project, my primary methods involve various levels of textual analysis. That is, my focus is primarily on the texts themselves, rather than on the senders and receivers of the texts. However, no study of videogames can ignore how they are produced and played, so I also address game makers and players in this analysis. A thorough

examination of game development and a research-based study of atypical play behaviors are beyond the scope of this text; however, fundamental developmental strategies and ideal player types are necessarily considered in our examination of videogame narratives as textual objects.

Analyzing videogame narratives as simultaneously narratives and games requires taking into account traditional narrative theory as well as emerging game theory. To date, attempting this dual perspective has been a tricky proposition, as scholars from various fields attempt to understand and synthesize each others' work in an effort to explore new aspects of videogame narrative. Many texts on the subject of videogame narrative tend to speak past or ignore each other with the result that much of the early work in the field of establishing basic definitions and parameters of study gets duplicated, leaving us with a patchy, insecure foundation upon which to build further research. There has not been much consistency in the approaches taken on the subject, and many significant avenues of inquiry have yet to be explored. This is not surprising considering that this is a new area of study dealing with a nascent technology still growing and changing rapidly. Very recently, however, texts are emerging that take into account a wider scope of previous research. This text follows such a path. My approach, which relies on traditional narrative, genre, and media theory, as well as emerging game theory, will, I hope, offer a clear introduction to videogame narratives as well as a platform for further study on the subject. The aims, methods, and conclusions of various treatments of videogame narratives are diverse and diffuse. I hope to bring together useful components of various studies and fill in the gaps of what has been said so far so that all parties interested in videogame narratives can understand what videogame narratives are, how they are similar and different from other narratives in other media, and how they vary from genre to genre.

I analyze how the videogame operates as a narrative medium by identifying aspects of the medium as a whole, and by examining how narrative and game combine to form new types of narrative experiences. I also compare the videogame to other narrative media, so we can see how videogames as narratives fit within the larger multimedia landscape of narratives. Finally, because what we call “videogames” is such a diverse array of forms, a general study of videogame narratives can only take us so far. No thorough study of videogame narratives can be complete without considering how narrative operates differently in different videogame genres. What we find is that many of the often discussed tensions between the alleged restrictions of narrative and the alleged freedoms of game-play are in most cases resolved by matching the structure of the rules-based game system with the highly formulaic structure of popular fiction genres in clever and organic ways, so that the limitations of both the narrative and the game overlap.

Therefore, this text analyzes how videogame narratives function both on their own terms and in the context of other narrative media, and it also analyzes how videogames incorporate popular fiction themes, formulas, and iconography in obvious but overlooked ways that resolve the tensions inherent in combining narrative and game. At the broadest level, my methodology is primarily based in what Marie-Laure Ryan has called “narrative media studies” or “transmedial narratology”—the study of narrative across media (35). My examination of how narrative operates within videogames is founded on the premise that there are things we can say about narrative across media, and there are things about a specific medium that shape narrative. Because of this, there are concepts that we can apply from narratological models developed for literature and film to the study of videogames, and there are concepts that we need to develop that are specific to the field of game studies. Examining a medium as multidimensional as the

videogame requires a diverse set of analytical tools. I will not be abandoning a structuralist narratological approach; rather, I will supplement traditional structuralist narratology with videogame theory, cognitive psychology, genre theory, and popular fiction and popular culture theory with the hope that by doing so, I will be able to provide new insights into how videogame narratives work.

While many studies addressing videogames recognize that they are popular cultural artifacts, and some current works mention in passing that, thematically, many games follow popular fiction formulas, no work to date has dealt with videogames extensively from a genre-based perspective and at the same time with a mixed media analytical approach that fully takes into account the interactive and playful nature of the medium. This is what I aim to do here. The chapters that follow cover the subject of videogame narratives in general terms that can be applied to several game genres, but also remind us of the multiplicity and complexity of the medium, exploring aspects of videogame narrative that do not fit neatly into the generalizations we can make about the medium as a whole, or even into specific genres. I explore fundamental questions about the nature of the videogame as a narrative medium. That which is new about them, that which continues to adapt within them at a frantic pace can be overwhelming to deal with without a context. Luckily, their novelty, their innovation, is only a small part of the whole that we can analyze when we examine the familiar foundation on which they build. This is my aim. It is not a new approach. Examining how medium and genre affect textual creation and reception is at least as old as Aristotle, so even though much of what follows is uncharted territory, there are well established methods for us to map out this new terrain.

A Walkthrough

The remaining chapters in this text share the general aim of examining how videogame narratives work. Chapters 2 and 3 examine videogame narratives in the broad context of media

analysis, breaking down the major elements of narrative as they exist in videogames. Chapter 4 then builds on what we know about videogame narratives, and puts this in perspective by comparing the videogame to other narrative media. Chapter 5 takes a more narrow approach, focusing on how specific genres and formulas operate in videogames, and how narrative formulas operate differently within each game genre. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes this text by looking forward to the future of videogame narratives.⁹ The paragraphs below provide a more thorough breakdown of what to expect from each chapter that follows.

Chapter 2: Games, Narratives, and Computer Mediation defines the key terms we need to know for us to delineate the parameters of this study and provide a clear basis on which to continue in more detail. It also supplies a general introduction to the videogame as an interactive narrative medium, illustrating how game and narrative elements combine in videogame narratives.

Chapter 3: Who's in Control?: The Roles of Makers and Players in the Development of Evocative Videogame Narratives continues by analyzing the relationships between game makers, the games they make, and the people who play the games. The focus in this chapter is on how each of these entities plays a role in the formation of meaningful, evocative, interactive narrative experiences. Two main issues are addressed. The first is the issue of authorial control versus player agency in videogames. The second is the issue of balancing the player agency necessary for a pleasurable gaming experience with the empathy inherent to powerful, meaningful narrative.

⁹ All of these chapters employ a variety of critical ideas from media studies, cognitive psychology, and structuralist narratology in examining how videogame narratives operate. Though many structuralist theories, such as those put forth by Tsvetan Todorov and Vladimir Propp, have come under attack in recent years, because they tend to exclude those works that push the boundaries of narrative convention, in general, structuralist narratology is more usefully applied than poststructuralist theories when it comes to the vast majority of mainstream videogames, which are currently more often than not produced in much the same way as main stream Hollywood films, with the same aims of universal access and appeal.

Chapter 4: Videogame Remediations:¹⁰ Connections to other Narrative Media

moves on to examine videogames in relation to other narrative media such as the oral tradition and print texts. It focuses on the two main attributes said to distinguish videogames from other narrative media: interactivity and play, and examines precedents for these qualities in other narrative media. Here, the issues of authorial control and player agency examined in Chapter 3 are further explored with an emphasis on how game makers embrace the spatial nature of videogames, and draw on a history of spatial narrative to allow for a balance of player freedom and plot progression in various genres of videogame narratives.

Chapter 5: Genre and Formula in Videogame Narratives analyzes the problematic concept of genre in videogames. Genre is a problematic concept in any context, but this is particularly the case in videogames, since hybridization and cross-over occurs both at the level of play-mechanics and at the level of narrative. However, despite the multi-layered problems with delineating generic categories within videogames, and recognizing the fluid and paradoxical nature of genre in any media, the premise of Chapter 5 is that genre can still be useful to our understanding of videogames and videogame narratives.

To this end, this chapter offers a specific examination of individual game genres and popular fiction formulas that operate within them. It explores three major videogame genres that characteristically contain strong narrative elements. Each of these game genres is paired with a popular fiction formula typical to it. These genre pairings are as follows: Adventure Games and Mystery, Action Games and Horror, and Role-Playing Games and Science Fiction/Fantasy. The three genres of videogames were chosen because they are the genres that rely most heavily on narrative for their overall experience, and the three popular fiction genres were chosen because

¹⁰ Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin define their concept of *remediation* as “the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms” (273).

they are the most dominant fiction genres in videogames. Each pairing was made with purpose, but other combinations would have been possible. While the primary goal of each of these pairings is to examine how the chosen genre of popular fiction helps shape the particular pleasures of each type of play experience, they also aim to illuminate how narrative and interactivity operate together in each of the game types as a whole, and not just in games that follow the thematic formula of the chosen popular fiction genre.

Finally, **Chapter 6: Looking Forward: The Future of Videogame Narratives** suggests new directions for the future of videogame narrative. It will cover how technological advancements continue to drive the emergent medium of videogames and how this will likely continue to shape how narrative operates in an interactive computer-based environment. The final chapter also addresses those works on the margins that have been glossed over before. The preceding chapters focus on popular, commercially released videogames—the middle ground between avant-garde and folk games. The final pages of this text will address how broadband and more advanced development tools are driving videogame narrative in new direction on the web and in installations. Here, the broader scope of the interactive revolution and the convergence that is already beginning to take place between the interactivity of computers and others screens—television, film, and texts that make their way from the printed page to the screen—is considered.

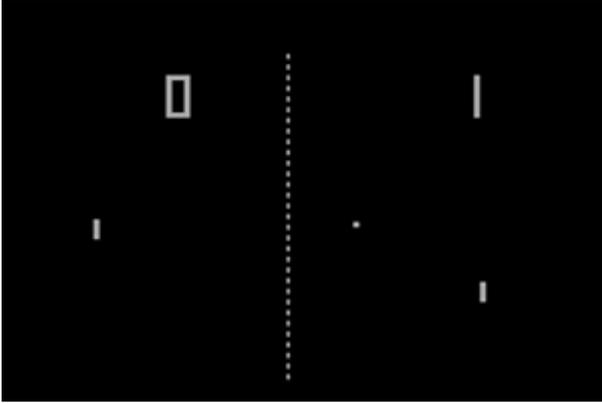


Figure 1-1. Screenshot from *Pong* (1972).



Figure 1-2. Screenshot from *Table Tennis* (2006).

CHAPTER 2
GAMES, NARRATIVES, AND COMPUTER MEDIATION

Defining Videogame Narratives

Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.
—Hannah Arendt

Philosophical and scientific discourses are founded on the expression of precise definitions. They are as necessary to the conveyance of knowledge as air and water are to life. But as political theorist Hannah Arendt's quote suggests, definitions are not the only way, and perhaps not always the best way, to communicate meaning. To the extent that they use language as a precise, scientific tool to state definitive meaning, definitions are fundamentally flawed. Just like the air that we breathe, and the water that we drink, definitions are polluted with incidental impurities. And just as the impurities in water and air can eventually deteriorate our health, definitional impurities, analyzed with the microscopic gaze of the critic, can undermine the core meaning that the writer or speaker is attempting to convey.

No matter how hard we try to immunize concepts from ambiguity and imprecision, the very nature of language ensures that, inevitably, oxidation will occur, bodies will break down, free radicals will spread, rust will form—in short, things will fall apart. This is because language is ultimately dependent on context, and, therefore, all linguistic meaning is also dependent on context. This is especially true of broad concepts that are used in a variety of contexts, and which are thus particularly difficult to pin down with precise definitions. Unfortunately for us, the two primary terms that we must know before we can begin a thorough analysis of videogame narratives—*game* and *narrative*—are two such broad concepts.

If this text were a narrative, I could avoid the pitfalls of defining these terms. Generally, storytellers show audiences events without explicitly telling them what they mean, requiring audiences to interpret meaning on their own. Because of this, a story can mean many things to

many people; it does not need observer agreement. Narrative can represent the complexities of life without breaking them down into differentiated, quantifiable, and determinate units. The advantage of the revelatory method of narrative knowledge sharing over the more definitive scientific method of knowledge acquisition is that it can approximate rather than stipulate. Narrative does not use language as a precise, scientific tool to state definitive meaning, but as an imprecise, artistic tool to indicate meaning. One could argue, as Arendt seems to do, that because narrative does not try to express meaning definitively, it does a better job of revealing meaning than philosophical and scientific communication. Sometimes, however, it is necessary to clearly demarcate the parameters of a discourse by establishing definitions, despite their limitations.

This chapter attempts the precarious task of establishing definitions for the problematic key terms we need to know for us to effectively continue in more detail in the chapters that follow. But it does so in a way that takes Arendt's admonishment against definitions to heart. While the effort is made to define concepts as precisely as possible, it is made with an appreciation for the legitimacy of the notion that the meaning of some terms cannot be expressed clearly by simply describing their essential properties. This is particularly true of concepts like *game* and *narrative* that have their essential properties so closely tied to their usage. And I will argue that this is especially true of videogame narratives, reliant as they are for their actualization as videogame narratives on the player's decision to play the videogame as both a game and a narrative. Therefore, what follows is not only an attempt to define precisely the core elements of a videogame narrative, and its constituent parts, but to approximate the qualitative aspects that I argue are equally as essential to our understanding of the concept as one that is dependent on a player for actualization.

In Chapter 1, I attempted to define the term *videogame narrative* as precisely as possible while at the same time recognizing the equally as vital, but necessarily less definable, role of the player in the actualization of the concept. A **videogame narrative** was briefly defined as a videogame in which narrative and game elements are integrated at the level of their production with the intent of simultaneously evoking both narrative scripts and setting up the artificial conflicts that form the basis of game play; furthermore, a videogame narrative must be capable of achieving this intent at the level of its reception. This, of course, is but one of many possible definitions of the term. It is limiting, because our aim is not to analyze the narrative elements of all videogames, but to focus on those videogames that are purposefully and thoughtfully crafted to be simultaneously computer mediated game and narrative experiences, and more specifically, those videogames that achieve these goals to such an extent that players can feel as though they are playing through a narrative experience that drives the game forward.

This last stipulation is less than ideal, from a definitional standpoint, because it is qualitative, and perhaps more egregious, it is subjective. What this suggests is that, regardless of intent, to qualify as a videogame narrative, as I am defining it, a videogame must not only have the elements necessary to qualify as a game and a narrative, but it must combine these elements in a computer mediated environment effectively enough that they can be experienced as a substantial combination of the two forms. In this way, I am proposing that videogame narratives are like cakes rather than like stews. If one is making a stew, one may put all of the ingredients into a pot haphazardly, and still come out with something that can rightly be called a stew. But if one is making a cake, and puts all of the ingredients into a pan, unless they were combined in the right amounts and order, it is very unlikely that the end product will be received as a cake. What is, of course, inescapable in this formulation, is the dependence of the player's attitude toward

the finished product in determining whether or not the experience can be termed a videogame narrative. This stipulation may be unacceptably indeterminate to some, but it rightly emphasizes videogame narratives as processes rather than products. The meaning I am trying to express in the term *videogame narrative* is meaning in motion. That is to say, a videogame narrative may exist as such on its own, but in practical terms, it really only matters as an experience in action.

To pull all of these stipulations together, then, for us to understand videogame narratives, we must not only understand how they are at the same time computer mediated game and narrative experiences, but we must attempt to identify how both elements can be effectively presented and combined. Therefore, what follows is an analysis of the core properties of games, narratives, and a brief examination of how these two forms come together in the computer mediated environment of the videogame. And because a videogame narrative can so easily fall apart into its constituent parts, we will seek to identify what also makes for an *effective* combination of the two forms in a videogame narrative. So with that in mind, the rest of this chapter will attempt to do three things. First, it will attempt to define the term *game*. Second, it will attempt to define the term *narrative*. Finally, it will attempt to show how these two concepts combine in the computer mediated spaces of videogames in such a way as to encourage players to play through a narrative. As part of the presentation of this information, the videogame narrative *Beyond Good & Evil* will be offered as an example. It is not offered as the epitome of the term, or as some ideal, but simply as an example of one way that game and narrative elements can effectively come together in a videogame.

Games Defined

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein warned us that any formal definition of the term “game” is impossible, because the word is used too broadly to be able to draw clear boundaries around it (27-28). He said that “the concept ‘game’ is a concept with blurred edges” and the best

we can do with it is to say that the various things we call games share a “family resemblance” rather than universal, essential characteristics (27-29). This warning has not stopped many theorists from trying to define the term *game*.¹ Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in their book *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* do an excellent job of assessing and synthesizing the many definitions of game from such seminal figures in the study of play and games as Johann Huizinga, Roger Caillois, Brian Sutton-Smith, and many others to create their own definition. While it may not be possible, as Wittgenstein points out, to come up with a universally acceptable definition of such a widely used, complicated term, Salen and Zimmerman’s definition strikes the right balance between inclusiveness and narrowness, and highlights the elements necessary for our understanding of games in this discourse. They define a **game** as “a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome” (80). There are six key ideas in this definition that we need to examine—system, players, artificial, conflict, rules, and quantifiable outcome. When we examine the essential characteristics of narratives, we will see many parallels between them and the essential characteristics of games outlined below.²

First, a game is a **system**. A system, as defined by Salen and Zimmerman, “is a set of things that affect one another within an environment to form a larger pattern that is different from any of the individual parts” (50). Any system, including games, has four essential elements: objects, attributes, internal relationships, and environment (Littlejohn 41). Objects are the parts that make up a system; attributes are the qualities of the objects that make up a system;

¹ To be more precise, much critical attention has been given to the central and most problematic usage of the term—that of the category of what players play. Of course, other, secondary definitions of the term are less contested, such as the use of the word to refer to prey being hunted.

² As we shall explore in Chapter 5, these similarities have led to the merging of both games and narratives in the past, and their combination in new media is certainly not a new phenomenon.

internal relationships are the relationships among the objects that make up a system; and the environment is the context that surrounds a system (Littlejohn 41).

Furthermore, a game can be framed as three interrelated systems—as a formal system, an experiential system, and a cultural system. That is, we can focus on games as a formal system of rules, or as an experiential system of interaction between players (whether between human players, or in the case of videogames, sometimes between human players and artificial intelligences), or as a cultural system that is connected to the larger contexts of society (Salen and Zimmerman 51-52). All three framings of games as systems are important to our understanding of videogame narratives. For instance, it is important to understand how the rules that define how the objects within a game interact are related to the representational aspects of videogame narratives. It is also important to understand how players interact with objects within the narrative space of a game world. Finally, understanding the cultural context of games is essential to our understanding of how the game world relates to the world outside of the game.

One of the essential components of a game system is **player(s)**—games require players. More specifically, a game requires a game player—someone who “interacts with the system of a game in order to experience the play of the game” (80). The concept of play is vital to our understanding of games, but we must narrow the concept down to game play, which is “the formalized interaction that occurs when players follow the rules of a game and experience its system through play” (303). This is a narrow subset of more general ludic activities, and in the broadest context, the quality of being playful. Game play is the most structured of all ludic activities and requires the most structured of all ludic attitudes.

The idea that playing a game requires a certain attitude is echoed by many theorists. Warren Motte, in *Playtexts: Ludics in Contemporary Literature* goes as far as to say that

Wittgenstein's suggestion that games cannot be clearly defined, but rather that they all share a 'family resemblance' "can be accounted for by the attitude with which we approach those activities, an attitude that is—in varying degree—ludic in character" (Motte 14). Brian Suits coined the phrase *lusory attitude* to describe this state of mind; Suits wrote that "to play a game, a group of players accepts the limitations of the rules because of the pleasures a game can afford" (Suits 23). So entering into a game world, then, requires the right attitude—players must recognize that they are entering into a different world, governed by its own rules, and must be willing to learn those rules and play by them to enjoy the game.

An important aspect of a game world, and one of the reasons why we enjoy being in it, is that it is **artificial**. A game is delineated from the "real world" in the implementation of its rules and by the acceptance of these rules by its players.³ This is not to suggest that outside events do not intrude on the game space. In multiplayer games especially, aspects of the outside world intrude on the fiction of the game world, breaking the frame of the game as players transgress the rules of the game and break the fictional framework they have taken on inside the game world. However, for our purposes, where the complexities of everyday life intrude on the bounded spaces of games, they do so as interlopers, disrupting the flow of the game, either stopping play entirely, or devolving the activity into less formal levels of play. One may play in any space, but one plays games in specific, bounded spaces—on a field, or a court, or on a board, or within the computer generated spaces inside videogames. Salen and Zimmerman call this clearly

³ The extent to which this is true of all games is debatable. Some game theorists extend the concept of games beyond the realm of safe, bounded spaces and use the term much more broadly to apply to all sorts of social interactions—including some very "real," very unsafe activities. The argument is that if one treats other systems as one treats a game, approaching them with the same lusory attitude, that these activities are also games, i.e. war as a game, dating as a game, etc. For our purposes, however, while other aspects of life can be treated like systems, and people may see these systems as games, they are not really games if they cannot be bounded by clearly defined rules of play within a separate, safe, space and time.

differentiated game space the *magic circle*—“a specifically demarcated time and space...the space within which a game takes place.” (99).

Within the magic circle of a game, at the heart of it, is **conflict**. All games have conflict. Games require players to move through them from an initial state to an end state. Games make this movement challenging. Overcoming challenges is rewarding and pleasurable to the player. As we shall see when we define narrative, this is one of the primary areas where games and narratives overlap. As Salen and Zimmerman put it, “game conflict provides both opportunity for narrative events and a narrative context that frames the obstacles a player must overcome” (387). A player in videogames is often given an avatar to control—a protagonist representation of the player within the game world. The activities of this avatar in the game world are hindered by obstacles that make the game challenging. These obstacles are often personified as antagonists, villains that stand in the players’ way. Game play takes on more meaning as players are motivated by this sort of narrative context.

A narrative framework can also help players understand the rules of a game, and give meaning to why they should abide by these rules. All games have **rules**—“rules provide the structure out of which play emerges, by delimiting what the player can and cannot do” (Salen and Zimmerman 80). Games are organized play, and rules provide that organization. Rules have several important characteristics that are useful to our discussion of videogame narratives. Specifically, rules limit player actions, they are explicit and unambiguous, and they are fixed and binding (Salen and Zimmerman 122-124).

One of the complaints many ludologists have about combining narrative with a game is that the narrative restricts the freedom inherent in the game (Costikyan 44). However, all games are inherently limited by the fixed, binding, explicit rules of play. In fact, one of the reasons why

players choose to play games is because the rules of a game are unambiguous and binding.

Whereas “real life” is filled with ambiguity and uncertainty, and people often don’t know what to do in a given situation, in the artificial, controlled, bounded environment of a game, everything is controlled by the rules of play.

There is something freeing in submitting to the rules of a game. Players maintain the luscious attitude needed to continue abiding by arbitrary, sometimes absurdly inefficient limitations—because doing so, eventually, can lead to great satisfaction as a player overcomes these limitations to reach desired goals.⁴ The comforting thing about a game is that everything in the game system, everything within the magic circle, abides by the same rules, so if the rules are followed, players know they can achieve their goals. In the real world, where there are too many variables in play, this is not a certainty.

In a game, the existence of an attainable goal state is a certainty. All games have **quantifiable outcomes**. Players know that the reason they are playing is because there is a goal state. This may be as simple as a numerical score assigned to the player’s performance, or some end game scenario that clearly establishes the player as having won or lost. This quality separates games from other less formal play activities (Salen and Zimmerman 80). It also potentially separates our concept of game from many play activities that are traditionally understood as games. Two of the notable examples for our purposes are open-ended role-playing games and computer simulation programs often labeled as games (Salen and Zimmerman 81-82).

⁴ Of course, while rules are intended to be binding, some players cheat. Some cheating is actually sanctioned by single player game designers to ensure that players of all skill levels can reach a satisfying goal state. However, players of multiplayer games who cheat against other players are in direct violation of the game.

Though digital single player role-playing games such as the *Final Fantasy* games do have quantifiable outcomes, traditional table top role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, and, more recently, massively multiplayer online role-playing games such as *World of Warcraft*, are open-ended experiences lacking a single, well-defined outcome. Players create characters and experience campaigns by achieving micro-victories, but when the ultimate end of the game will occur is left open. In this way, they are much like serial television shows, where a show's macro-plot elements won't be wrapped up until the show has run its course. These experiences can still be classified as games to the extent that each gaming session does have quantifiable goals, and, of course, while these play experiences are adaptable enough to stave off an ultimate, definitive, ending, players do very often play to some ultimate end that gives closure to the gaming experience.

Players can also do this within computer simulation programs. Programs like *The Sims* are created to give users the ability to play in a virtual sandbox. Salen and Zimmerman say that these programs are more like toys than games, but players can play these "toys" as games. Many players decide to create their own rules and goal states in open-ended simulations, thus providing the essential elements of a game that may not be explicitly outlined by the game designers. For example, in *The Sims*, a player may attempt to have a character that he or she is controlling reach a certain level of wealth in a certain amount of time, or a player may try to see how long a character can survive without eating.⁵

Likewise, just as many players play open-ended simulations as games by creating their own goal states, other players play videogames intended to be games as toys, enjoying certain aspects of the game world without ever progressing in it to the designer created goal states.

⁵ The attraction of such open-ended sandbox games is the high level of customization and the nearly complete control a player has over outcomes, which often leads to some rather cruel goal state possibilities.

Examples of this sort of subversive play are often called *emergent* game play and include when players drive around in a game like *Grand Theft Auto III* simply to see the scenery, or when players make their avatars act out performances that have nothing to do with the progression of the game for the purpose of creating *machinima*—a fast growing activity in which players use film techniques to create narratives using the game engine.

As these examples suggest, whether an object can ultimately be classified as a game or not depends not only on the game makers, but also on the game players. All that matters is that the play experience contains the essential game elements outlined above. This definition of *game*, then, contains several limiting factors that allow us to differentiate games from other systems and from other, less formal play experiences. These limiting factors weed out several things that are called videogames and that are played on computers and consoles. However, this definition is also flexible enough to allow some of these play experiences to be categorized as games, as long as they are played as such.

Salen and Zimmerman, while attempting to determine boundaries around the concept *game*, admit that it is a permeable concept. As they put it, “sometimes the answer to the question of whether or not a game is a game rests in the eye of the beholder. Any definition of a phenomenon as complex as games is going to encounter instances where the application of the definition is somewhat fuzzy” (82). This is likely as close as we can come to clearly defining the term *game*. As we shall see, the concept of narrative is equally difficult to bind definitively.

Narrative Defined

If asked the question, “Do you know what narrative is?” most people would immediately say “yes, of course.” But if these same people were asked the follow up question, “How would you define narrative?” few of them would be able to give an answer that would be satisfactory under all circumstances. Concepts such as narrative that are so ubiquitous, and that we feel we

know intrinsically, are often the hardest to define. We may even be offended that someone is asking us to define such a basic, well-known word, and we may also become annoyed, because we don't have a readily available answer that truly encapsulates the term *narrative*. Here again, we return to the notion that some ideas are best expressed imprecisely, without defining them. Most people feel they know what narrative is; most people could easily offer examples of it, and, if forced, could describe many of its characteristics. But coming up with a formal definition is a more difficult task. Doing so is perhaps a fundamentally limited undertaking. It may well be that like the term *game*, the term *narrative* is too big and broad a concept for us to clearly demarcate. But just as this possibility has not stopped many from trying to define game, it has also not stopped many from attempting to define narrative.

While people have written about narrative for as long as there has been writing, and it is very likely that they have talked about narrative for as long as there has been speech, relatively recently, there has been an explosion of narrative theory. Theorists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have explored narrative from many angles and have proposed many definitions based on their particular theoretical approach. Some of these approaches include existential, cognitive, aesthetic, sociological, and technical (Ryan 2). Surveying all of the approaches taken to narrative in recent years is far beyond the needs of this chapter. But there is something that all of these approaches share: their definitions of narrative serve their discourses. That is not to say that anyone can define narrative as anything to serve his or her needs, and indeed, most narrative theorists agree on most of the characteristics of narrative, but the perspective of narrative theorists differ, depending on their approach. Some approaches fail to acknowledge that narrative transcends media, confusing aspects of narrative with aspects of verbal communication and print technology. The approach we will use here is necessarily broader, since the premises

of this text are that videogames are a narrative medium, and that narrative is shaped by this medium. These two, simple presumptions already direct us away from certain traditional conceptions of narrative.

Marie-Laure Ryan in *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, insists that we must expand our concept of narrative beyond thinking about it as solely a verbal phenomenon if we really want to be able to examine narrative across media (13). She proposes that we do this by overcoming the print-centric biases of many narrative theorists. She lists several pairs of terms in which the first term of the pair is the unmarked, unquestioned feature of narrative, whereas the second term is more in dispute among print-centric theorists. For our purposes, two of these pairs are particularly important: Diegetic/Mimetic and Receptive/Participatory. Because we are beginning with the premise that videogames can be a narrative medium, and because videogame narratives rely heavily on mimetic and participatory features, our definition of narrative must embrace both sides of each of these pairs.

In his *A Dictionary of Narratology*, Gerald Prince's second definition of diegesis puts it in direct contrast to mimesis, which is in keeping with the tradition established by Plato and Aristotle. Prince defines diegesis in this sense as "telling, recounting, as opposed to showing, enacting."⁶ In this formulation, diegesis places the events of a narrative in the past, and requires a narrator to narrate this past to an audience. This type of narration is the primary mode of oral and written storytelling, and, as such, diegetic narration is the unquestioned, unmarked term in the pair—no one questions that a storyteller recounting past events to an audience is narrative. Mimetic narration, however, is an act of showing, rather than telling. It does not require a

⁶ Gerald Prince gives as his primary definition of diegesis a broad meaning, which does not conflict with mimesis. He states that diegesis is "the (fictional) world in which the situations and events narrated occur." When the term is used in this way, it can apply to narrative of any kind in any media, and contrasts only with non-diegetic elements, such as sound effects or music in a videogame that is not heard by the characters in the game, but is heard by players outside the game world.

dramatized narrator, although such a figure may be present.⁷ Mimetic narration is most common in the dramatic arts such as theater and movies, though episodes of mimetic narration can show up in diegetic dominated forms, such as when a writer uses dialogue, when “the voice of the narrator disappears behind the voice of the character” (Ryan 13). Likewise, diegetic narration can be found in movies—for example, when a movie uses a voice-over narrator.

Many theorists insist that narrative is inherently diegetic rather than mimetic. Because of this, as absurd as it may seem to casual observers who believe they know a story when they see one, some theorists do not acknowledge drama as narrative, but maintain that it is a separate category. Our definition of narrative cannot make such a distinction; it must accept that a narrative can be a showing of the now as well as a telling of the past, or else we cannot call a videogame a narrative. Narrative, for our purposes, is, as Prince has said, “not just product, but process, an object but also an act” (59). Once we accept that both diegesis and mimesis can be dominant narrative modes, we have taken our first important step toward developing a definition of narrative that can contain within it the videogame as a narrative medium.

But before we can propose a definition of narrative appropriate for our understanding of videogame narrative, one other pair of terms must be reconciled—Receptive/Participatory. Traditionally, outside of media analyses that attempt to study narrative across a wide range of media, narrative has been defined as a receptive mode. In this mode, narrative is received by an audience from a storyteller without playing an active role in the story. Readers or listeners may imagine that they are witnesses to the events of the story or even empathize with the protagonist to such a degree that they feel that they are a part of the story, but they have no control over how

⁷ Several narrative theorist have attempted to include non-literary narratives in print-centric definitions of narrative by extending the concept of the narrator to include undramatized narrators, such as voice-over narrators who are not characters in the narrative, and even, in the case of film the “camera’s eye” that dictates what we see in a film (Lacey 113-114).

the story unfolds—all narrative events are entirely pre-scripted and unchangeable. Receivers have no active role in the plot, besides the chore of processing and parsing the language used to tell the story. However, “in the participatory mode,” as Ryan puts it, “the plot is not completely pre-scripted. The recipient becomes an active character in the story, and through her agency she contributes to the writing of the plot...In many computer games, for instance, the user is represented in the game world through an avatar. By solving problems in the real time of the game session, she determines whether the life story of this avatar will end in success or failure or how long the avatar will live” (14). Of course, any conception of the videogame as a narrative medium must have at its core an acceptance of narrative as potentially both receptive and participatory.

With these two stipulations in place, we can begin to define narrative in such a way that does not exclude mimetic and participatory modes of expression. What an acceptance of both of these modes suggests is that we need a definition of narrative that identifies it as having certain essential characteristics in and of itself, but which is open about the modes through which narrative meaning can be transmitted. More specifically, we need a definition of narrative which does not situate narrative identity solely at the level of the teller, who creates narrative by recounting past events, but rather emphasizes it at the level of recipients/participants who can interpret any number of expressive modes in a given text to construct narrative meaning. Therefore, we need a definition that not only defines the formal elements of narrative, but also suggests the experiential aspects of narrative as well. Marie-Laure Ryan lays the groundwork for such a definition by stating three requirements that a text must meet to qualify as a narrative.

These requirements, truncated here, are as follows (8-9):

1. “A narrative text must create a world and populate it with characters and objects”
2. “The world referred to by the text must undergo changes”

3. “The text must allow the reconstruction of an interpretive network of goals, plans, causal relations, and psychological motivations around the narrated events”

The first two requirements of narrative stipulated above could have been drawn from just about any definition of narrative ever put forth. First, it is universally accepted that narrative is a **system of representation** in which a world is populated by characters and objects. There can be no narrative without a setting, characters, and objects with which characters interact. Second, narrative has been defined since Aristotle as a progressive system in which events are linked casually—a narrative progresses logically from a beginning state, through a middle state, to an end state (Beaugrande and Colby 45). More recently, structuralists such as Tzvetan Todorov have been even more precise with the type of progression commonly seen in narrative. Todorov outlined five steps of narrative progression, which, in essence, identifies **conflict** and the resolution of conflict as the driving force of narrative progression.⁸ Todorov asserts that narratives progress through the following stages (39):

1. A state of equilibrium at the outset
2. a disruption of the equilibrium by some action
3. a recognition of the disruption
4. an attempt to repair the disruption [this is the longest stage in a videogame narrative]
5. a reinstatement of equilibrium

The final requirement of narrative put forth by Ryan, that “the text must allow the reconstruction of an interpretive network of goals, plans, causal relations and psychological motivations around the narrated events” emphasizes the role of the recipient/participant in piecing together a meaningful plot. In short, it identifies as an essential component of narrative a

⁸ Recently, postmodern narratives, and poststructuralist theory have challenged this classical narrative structure, but as J. H. Miller has pointed out, narratives that do not precisely follow these steps “draw their meaning from the way they play ironically against our deeply engrained expectations that all narratives are going to be like that” (77). While such a detailed breakdown of the steps of narrative progression may not be universally applicable to all narrative, we will find that they generally do fit videogame narratives, which tend to be highly formulaic in their narrative presentation.

recipient/participant in much the same way as we identified the **player** as an essential component of a game. Just as games need players willing to take on the proper lusus attitude to engage in them, narratives need recipients/participants with the proper attitude to immerse themselves in them and derive meaning and pleasure from them. This is because narratives, like games, are arbitrarily limiting, insisting that we believe in them even as they put forth scenarios that tempt our doubts about their verisimilitude, and at best, offer an incomplete perspective of events. In his *Biographia Literaria*, Samuel Coleridge called this process of “poetic faith” in a fictional narrative “the willing suspension of disbelief” (312).

Drawing all of these essential elements of narrative together, we can put forth the following definition of narrative: a **narrative** is a progressive system of representation in which a world populated with characters and objects begins in a state of equilibrium, but is disrupted by conflict, and in which, characters strive to repair this disruption by achieving the goal state of restored equilibrium.⁹ When we compare the key ideas in this definition of narrative with the key ideas we examined in our definition of game, we see nearly universal harmony. Of the six elements we examined when we broke down the meaning of the term game—system, players, artificial, conflict, rules, and quantifiable outcome—five of them are implicit or have a direct corollary in our definition of the term narrative. We have identified both games and narratives as artificial/representational systems in which recipients safely witness or players safely participate in conflicts in an effort to reach a desired, quantifiable outcome. This overlap leaves out only one element of a game that we have not identified as essential to narrative—rules. Since so much has been said and written about the conflict between narrative and game and the difficulty

⁹ It is worth noting that sometimes the telling of the story may begin after the disruption of equilibrium has occurred. In the case of many murder mysteries, for instance, the story begins after the crime has occurred. In these cases, the equilibrium is either left implicit or it may be flashed back to during the telling of the story.

of combining the two, one might think that this unmatched element of games is in direct conflict with the essence of narrative, but this is not the case. In fact, as we shall explore in this chapter, and more fully in subsequent chapters, many of our most popular narratives are highly structured by well-established rules of formula and genre that lead an anticipating audience along a clearly marked path toward a quantifiable outcome.

As I shall attempt to establish, games and narratives are often most effectively combined when game designers recognize the potential for aligning the elements of games effectively with the elements of narratives so that the limitations inherent in both are naturalized and harmonized. By understanding the essential elements of games and narratives, we can begin to understand how this can be done. However, the above definitions only tell us the conditions that must be met for a text to qualify as a narrative or a game; they do not tell us how the combination of a narrative and a game captures and maintains an audience's interest. As we explore how games and narratives are combined in the computer mediated spaces of videogames in the next section, we must also analyze how videogame narratives can engage players to the extent that they are playing through a narrative. As we shall see, this requires making both the game and the narrative elements of the videogame narrative compelling.

Computer Mediation Outlined

Now that we have established the core elements of games and narratives, we can properly examine how these elements come together inside the computer mediated environments of videogames. In our definition of videogame narrative, there was one key idea that we have left unanalyzed until now—what distinguishes a videogame from other games. The simple answer is computer mediation. Videogames are first and foremost games, sharing all of the essential characteristics of games that we have already examined. What distinguishes videogames as a clearly defined subset of games in general, however, is that videogames exist in computer

mediated spaces, which require human-computer interfaces through which players input commands using game control devices and the computers generate visual (and nearly always auditory, and often haptic) feedback reflecting how these commands affect the game worlds.¹⁰

We might assume that the computer—in all its forms, representing an everything machine that drives the digital age forward—would be a medium of infinite possibilities for the combination and transmission of game and narrative modes. In some regards, this assessment is not far off. Within the virtual spaces generated by computers, content creators have nearly limitless options when it comes to creating worlds of increasingly graphical and physical sophistication, and populating them with nearly any sort of characters, objects, and obstacles they like. However, as is the case with any medium, the computer acts as a limiting factor that shapes what is possible, especially in terms of how players can interact with computer generated game worlds. Computer mediation dictates the boundaries of what is possible in a videogame, and thus, the possible combinations of narrative and game elements in a narrative game world.

One of the main limiting factors of computer mediation that has helped shape the development of videogame narratives is the way in which humans and computers communicate with each other. At one level, this limitation manifests in the relatively limited number of control options available to videogame players. Most videogames are played with the standard input device of a given platform. For the desktop or laptop computer this is typically a keyboard and mouse, for dedicated game consoles this is most often a specifically designed game control pad, and for handheld gaming devices this is the built-in control inputs for that device. Though these input devices have evolved over the years, and a growing number of games are using

¹⁰ The degrees and kinds of computer mediation players experience, of course, dependent on the sophistication of the hardware and software involved. Twisting a knob or pushing buttons on a game controller to play a computer mediated version of tennis or ping pong, for instance, is different from swinging a Wii remote to simulate the swinging of a racket in *Wii Sports* (2006).

dedicated peripherals that allow players to interact with game worlds in new ways, the control mechanisms of the human-computer interface are still a limiting factor for how players can interact with videogames.

At another level, which is particularly important for how the computer mediates the possibilities for the types of narrative interactions a player can experience in a videogame narrative, the limitations of the human-computer interface manifest in the language barrier that exists between humans and computers. Computers, so far, are incapable of fully parsing natural language, except in very limited circumstances. This greatly limits the possibilities for computer mediated, single player, interactive narrative, and has been a significant factor in shaping the dominate modes of player interaction in game worlds. Because of this limitation, players interact with the game world most often by enacting physical movements in the game space, rather than through linguistic communication, and when players are given the option of communicating through language, it is usually limited to choosing between lists of pre-scripted phrases.

However, despite the limitations inherent to the technology, the development of the videogame has given rise to a wide range of new narrative and game possibilities (we will explore these more fully when we examine the conventions of specific game genres in subsequent chapters). One of the main challenges for videogame designers is presenting these possibilities in a compelling way to an audience. Because videogames require significant effort on the part of players, they must continually entice players to keep on expending that effort. Videogame makers must overcome the limitations inherent in the medium to offer varied, compelling, experiences, or else players won't buy their products and expend the effort necessary to progress through them. When trying to create videogame narratives, game designers have the doubly difficult task of trying to integrate compelling game and narrative experiences

within the limitations of computer mediation. The main challenge is how to properly combine the pleasures typically derived from audiences being shown or told a story with the pleasures typically derived from an audience performing actions in a game. That is, how can the seemingly opposing demands of a rule-based system dependent on player actions be balanced with a representation-based system of passive audience reception.

Various game genres, and various games within these genres, deal with this problem in different ways, but in general, the solution involves a combination of methods ranging from oscillating non-interactive narrative content and non-narrative game content to more sophisticated methods that more fully integrate game and narrative progression. Crudely, we can place videogame narratives into four groups, depending on the level of integration between narrative and game elements:

1. nearly all of the narrative takes place in non-interactive episodes such as cut-scenes¹¹
2. much of the narrative is expressed through non-interactive episodes such as cut-scenes, but the narrative is also expressed through game play
3. some of the narrative is expressed through non-interactive elements such as cut-scenes, but much of the narrative is expressed through game play
4. all narrative expression takes place while the player interacts in the game world

Regardless of what category a videogame narrative falls into, the goal of its makers is to provide a compelling experience in which players are motivated to actively strive simultaneously toward narrative closure and the quantifiable outcome of the game. The best way to do this is to align as closely as possible the progressive structure of the narrative with the progressive structure of the game so that actions in the game performed by the player make sense within the context of the narrative, making players feel as though they are helping progress the narrative forward as they overcome the challenges put forth by the game. One way to analyze how this is

¹¹ Cut-scenes are typically non-interactive narrative sequences that often incorporate filmic techniques to present and progress the story of a game.

accomplished in a game is to see how the game and narrative elements of a videogame fit together structurally. When we do this, one of the potential points of congruence in the structures of compelling games and compelling narratives is the pleasure derived from the attainment of goals.

For a game to be enjoyable, it must present challenges to players, and it must motivate players to want to overcome these challenges. Likewise, in a narrative, characters are represented that overcome challenges in a way that fulfills a recipient's desires and expectations for resolution (or plays with these desires). We can align these dual pleasures by allowing players to aid in the achievement of narrative expectations through their actions in the game world as represented by their control over the avatar/protagonist. In this sense, narrative and game play elements have a symbiotic relationship where the game elements allow players to feel more involved in the progression of the plot and the narrative elements give a context for the game's progression to the desired goal state, allowing players to more accurately anticipate how best to act to reach that outcome.

Since all videogames are games, however, the progressions of videogame narratives are shaped by the rules of the game. Though different game genres draw on different sets of rules, all videogame narratives share the basic requirement of aligning the rules that govern game logic and progression with the rules that govern story logic and progression.

Robert de Beaugrande and Benjamin N. Colby in a 1979 article titled "Narrative Models of Action and Interaction" put forth rather presciently a model of narrative that is useful for our understanding of narrative as a rule based representational system that can effectively be integrated into a videogame experience. Their aim was to explain not just the elements of a narrative, but how these elements fit together into a story structure that makes narrative

compelling—an endeavor that serves our analysis well, since it is vital for a videogame narrative to be received as such to be compelling as a narrative. Beaugrande and Colby set forth a set of story-telling rules and a story comprehension process (44). They insist that the latter is completely dependent on the former. That is, we understand stories because at some level we recognize the “instantiation of narrative rules” (47). These rules dictate our expectations for how the various conflicts inherent in narrative will be resolved as characters act in a way that move them toward their desired goal states (44). Based on the narrative imperative of characters to move toward a goal state, Beaugrande and Colby proposed that we can agree on the following set of story-telling rules, which we can apply to story-telling in a videogame (45-46):

Rule 1—Identify at least one CHARACTER.

Rule 2—Create a PROBLEM STATE for the CHARACTER

Rule 3—Identify a GOAL STATE for the CHARACTER

Rule 4—Initiate a PATHWAY from the PROBLEM STATE leading toward the GOAL STATE.

Rule 5—Block or postpone attainment of the GOAL STATE.

Rule 6—Mark one STATE TRANSITION as a TURNING POINT

Rule 7—Create a TERMINAL STATE which is clearly marked as MATCHING or NOT MATCHING the GOAL STATE

There are some obvious parallels between this structural model of narrative rules and Todorov’s stages of narrative progress. The main differences between the two are that here we have the addition of at least one character, something that coincides with or definition of narrative, and here we have a shift in emphasis to the creators of narrative from the narrative itself. But these prescriptive instructions for creating compelling narratives, like so many before and after, derive from an examination of the structures that have worked in the past. What we discover when we examine what has worked in videogame narratives is that they continue to follow the patterns set forth by this story-telling system as it has evolved in other media.

Most videogame narratives are highly formulaic, following rules dictated by genre conventions. As I have suggested, this may be because rule-based story-telling fits so well with

a rule-based game world. Many critics of videogame narratives see this as a hindrance, dismissing videogame narratives precisely because they are so formulaic. For instance, Steven Poole in his book *Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames* wrote in a derogatory manner that video game narratives are “more like folktales than like novels...they are highly plot driven and predicated on strong actions” (Poole 95-96). In his estimation, this barely qualifies them as proper narratives, but the fact is that the vast majority of people enjoy formulaic, plot driven stories “predicated on strong actions.”

Narrative and Game Rules in *Beyond Good & Evil*

It is admittedly true that past and current computer mediated combinations of game and narrative are in some ways fundamentally limited. It would be fair, for instance, to say that Homer’s action-driven *Odyssey* might be adapted into a compelling videogame narrative, but Joyce’s language-driven *Ulysses* would not. The primary strength of the videogame as a narrative medium is its ability to allow players to interact in an action-driven plot in ways that other media cannot, and its primary drawbacks are the linguistic limitations inherent to contemporary computer technology, and the insistence of games to be structured by clear rules of progression. If we accept these strengths and weaknesses and conceive of both narratives and games as rule-based systems of progression, we can begin to examine videogame narratives on their own terms, recognizing how the underlying structures of narrative and game fit together to form a compelling videogame narrative.

Let us now examine a videogame narrative to see how the narrative rules set forth by Beaugrande and Colby coincide with the rules of the game in a compelling way. The example we will use is the critically acclaimed, multiplatform 2003 action-adventure game, *Beyond Good*

& *Evil*.¹² This game has been recognized for both its varied, immersive game play and its sophisticated, compelling narrative. It contains some interactive elements typical to the three game genres in which we find most videogame narratives—action games, adventure games, and role-playing games.¹³ It also weaves together story elements from the three most common narrative genres found in videogames—mystery, horror, and science fiction/fantasy.¹⁴ In this regard, it is, if not the epitome of a videogame narrative, certainly representative of the sorts of videogame narratives we will be examining throughout this text.

Let us begin examining *Beyond Good & Evil* by seeing if we can derive its rules from what the marketers of this game claim it to be. Here is the publisher's product description for the game:

For centuries, the planet Hillys has been locked in conflict with a race of relentless alien invaders. Wary of her government's promises to repel the aliens for good, a rebellious action reporter named Jade sets out to capture the truth behind the prolonged war. Armed with her camera, Dai-Jo staff, and fierce determination, Jade soon finds herself inside the jaws of a horrific conspiracy, and face to face with an evil she cannot possibly fathom. In a world where deception is the deadliest weapon of all, will Jade's discoveries be enough to free her people?

Features:

- *Join the rebellion: As action-reporter Jade, capture the truth using stealth, force, and wits against a government that deceived you. Stop at nothing until the perpetrators are exposed.*
- *Expose the conspiracy: enter a futuristic world full of deception, where nothing is as it seems and exposing the truth is the only hope of restoring freedom.*
- *Prepare for anything: brace yourself for a journey through the reaches of a strange and ever-changing universe from the mind of innovative game creator, Michel Ancel.*

¹² *Beyond Good & Evil* represents one of the rare games developed and released across multiple platforms that became a critical success. It was released for the GameCube, Playstation 2, Xbox, and the PC. Most games released on so many platforms suffer from the publishers' resources being over-extending as they spend less time and effort polishing each iteration of the game in an effort to reach as big a market as possible.

¹³ Mixing as many disparate game play elements as *Beyond Good & Evil* does is often a recipe for disastrous incoherence and frustrated player expectations. However, this game manages to make it work and represents a relatively new move by the industry to offer a wide variety of game play features in a single game to appeal to fans of various game genres.

¹⁴ See Chapter 6 for a more thorough analysis of these game and narrative genres.

- *United we fight: battle against the forces of conspiracy with Jade's punishing Dai-Jo staff techniques, and master amazing tag-team fighting combos with allied resistance fighters Pey'j and Double H.*

As the product description suggests, *Beyond Good & Evil* promises its audience a narrative rife with social and political commentary and a fun, interactive game experience all in one package. It suggests to players that they will be able to perform many actions in a provocative game world filled with narrative intrigue and game play challenges. For such a combination to work well, the rules of the game should all coincide with the patterns of behavior of characters and objects as we imagine they should act in the narrative in which the game puts its players. And according to the vast majority of reviews by professional game reviewers and game players, which almost universally cite how well the game gives players logical interactive challenges within the context of a compelling, coherent narrative, *Beyond Good & Evil* is successful in doing this. If we return to the story-telling rules put forth by Beaugrande and Colby, we can examine how this game harmonizes the rules of its game elements with the rules of its story.

Rule 1 says that we must identify at least one character. The main character in *Beyond Good & Evil* is Jade, a young female reporter who the player controls. In our definition of game, we identified rules as clear, explicit restrictions that dictate how players can interact in the game world. If we must identify a main character as crucial to a narrative, we must fit that character within the structured, rule-based environment of the game. In *Beyond Good & Evils'* game world, Jade is limited by her assigned game attributes, all of which are logical in the context of her narrative character (Figure 2-1). She is a young, physically fit reporter with a mechanic for an uncle, and a network of friends sympathetic and helpful to her, first in her role as a foster mother to children orphaned by the war who needs to take pictures of exotic animals to pay for their care, and later in her quest to reveal the truth about the war. Players are limited within the

game world, because they are controlling Jade, who has a defined, limited set of abilities. Jade has realistically proportioned strength, speed, resilience, and a complement of objects (i.e. her camera, her staff, and her hovercraft). Her character harmonizes the rules of the story with the rules of the game. Controlling her allows players to perform a variety of actions in the game, but all of these actions have reasonable limitations consistent with Jade's character. This consistency makes learning the rules of the game easier for players, because Jade's limitations are intuitive. Once a character in a videogame narrative is identified and described, players understand what is and is not possible while controlling such a character.¹⁵

Rule 2 dictates that a narrative must create a problem state for the character. There are many micro-level problem states created in this game for Jade to overcome, but the initial problem state is that Jade's life and the lives of the people that she cares about are being increasingly adversely affected by the ongoing war raging around her. This situation logically leads to the fulfillment of Rule 3, which states that a narrative must also have a goal state that the character must strive to reach. Again, at a micro-level, many goal states are identified to give players more instant game and narrative gratification, but at the macro-level, the overarching goal state of *Beyond Good & Evil* is for Jade to try to discover the truth about the war and possibly end the suffering she sees around her.

The next rule of story-telling, Rule 4, is that there must be a pathway from the problem state leading toward the goal state. The makers of *Beyond Good & Evil* provide such a pathway, giving the player clues that lead Jade to IRIS, an underground network that has been broadcasting damaging information that they have uncovered about the Alpha Sections elite

¹⁵ As an example of how other characters in the game are also logically constrained by the rules that govern the narrative and the game, Jade's anthropomorphized pig-like uncle, Pey'j, is slower than Jade, but compensates for this with a pair of jet boots, and uses his wrench to fight off foes.

military who allegedly defend the planet of Hillys from the invading alien army, the DomZ. IRIS gives Jade missions that may lead to Jade uncovering the ultimate truth behind the war, which she can then give to IRIS to broadcast over pirated airwaves to the people of Hillys. This involves players embarking on a series of missions where they overcome the challenges of the game, which follows Rule 5—that there must be objects that attempt to block or postpone the attainment of this goal state. In this game, these obstacles are embodied primarily by the military who seek to stop IRIS and stop the public from knowing the truth, which would lead to rebellion. The player, as Jade, must overcome these obstacles throughout the game, which simultaneously fulfill rules that govern game and plot progression. Some examples of the type of player-driven actions in the game are fight sequences against the military agents who are trying to stop Jade from uncovering the truth, puzzles that she must solve to progress on to another stage in her quest for the truth, and seemingly insurmountable obstacles that the player can only overcome through careful planning and strategizing. The overarching problem driving the player forward is the eventual attainment of the game’s winning goal state, which will also provide narrative closure—uncovering and disseminating the truth about the military to all of Hillys, and trying to stop the forces injuring Hillys and its inhabitants.

Rule 6 says there must be a marked turning point in the narrative’s progress. In *Beyond Good & Evil*, the biggest turning point is when, through the player’s efforts, Jade uncovers the terrible truth about the military, and the fate of those captured by the DomZ invaders. From this point, the game moves to the enactment of Rule 7—the “terminal state which is clearly marked as matching or not matching the goal state” (45-46). This, of course, fits perfectly within the structure of a game, which ends in loss or some level of victory. Throughout the game, if the player missteps significantly in terms of strategy or reflexes, the game will end with Jade’s death

or capture, but as we have established, the real driving pleasure of games, and of formulaic narratives, is the promise of the possibility that the goal state will be reached. With enough effort, the player of *Beyond Good & Evil* does reach a terminal state that matches the goal state—the truth is uncovered (see the footnote for plot and game spoilers).¹⁶

As *Beyond Good & Evil* illustrates, a successful videogame narrative integrates narrative and game elements within a computer mediated space, so that players feel as though their actions are driving the narrative forward. To do this, the game must first and foremost compel players to continue expending the effort involved to play the game. But it must also accomplish this by connecting the game play to a narrative the players want to continue participating in. This is primarily accomplished by tapping into players' desires for sustained engagement and eventual closure—two things that both good games and good stories offer.

This chapter has attempted to show what a videogame narrative is, and how the seemingly opposing natures of narrative and game can be brought together to form a unified entertainment experience. With rough definitions in place for the key elements of study, and a brief examination of some of the ways these elements are brought together put forth, the chapters that follow aim at elucidating more thoroughly the characteristics of videogame narratives.

¹⁶ The Alpha Elite military force is actually controlled by the invading DomZ, which are using the inhabitant of Hillys as a food source, kidnapping them with the aide of the military to be drained of their life force. The player, through Jade, has helped uncover this truth and has gone one step further to also help defeat the DomZ forces.



Figure 2-1. Screenshot of *Beyond Good & Evil* (2003). Jade hides with her camera from the Alpha Section guard.

CHAPTER 3
WHO'S IN CONTROL?: THE ROLES OF MAKERS AND PLAYERS IN THE
DEVELOPMENT OF EVOCATIVE VIDEOGAME NARRATIVES

Meaningful Play or a Waste of a Day?

As an undergraduate, I was once cajoled by a comely coed to attend a presentation by a visiting mathematics professor who promised in his provocative flyer to provide irrefutable proof of the existence of God. It turned out to be a two hour long set up to a centuries old premise—there has to be an uncaused cause, something that set all the dominoes in motion. By the end of it, many who had come, agnostic and believer alike, were left thoroughly unsatisfied. The professor seemed quite pleased with his presentation, but the grumbled response of the shrunken crowd was a collective, exasperated, “and”? I could not help but speak up and ask, “if we accept your argument, where does it leave us? If we can only know that something started it all, do we really know anything more than we did before? An uncaused cause or infinite regression—it is just one incomprehensible concept replacing another.” The professor seemed perplexed by my underwhelmed response. Perhaps we were being unfair, but most of us were expecting something a bit more specific. We came in expecting to be wowed by proof of the existence of a much more particular and complex entity—the omnipresent being represented in most major religions. Instead, we got a fairly straightforward case for the existence of a faceless, speechless, unseen creator—an absent gardener. No one walked away feeling any different than they did before. The show did not live up to the billing.

Years later, whenever I attend panels at conferences, or read articles and blogs where the narrative and artistic merit of videogames is debated, I often feel as though I am back at the long-winded and flawed proof of the existence of God presentation. I look back on that presentation and find myself feeling remorseful about my reaction to the mathematics professor, because now I understand what it means to be on the other side of a collective look of “and?” Much of

the early scholarship in videogames incorporated apologetic justifications for why we should study games beyond their corrupting potential on young minds. Almost every presentation (including my first few) on videogames at a conference not solely dedicated to videogames began with a preamble justifying the presentation, and explaining that videogames are worthy of studying alongside texts from other, more established narrative media. After attending dozens of such presentations, experienced audiences members began to feel about them as we all do about the FBI warnings against video piracy that we are forced to watch before getting to the movie on a DVD—oh, why can't we fast forward past this?¹

Like the mathematic professor's presentation, these preambles did little to shift opinions—those who already believed in the artistic merit and potential of the medium were left looking at their watches and those who did not were left thinking, “And? Even if we accept your argument, where does that leave us? So you have shown that some games look pretty and some games include some story elements, what does that tell us about the nature of videogame narrative?” Attempting to prove that interactive narratives, and more specifically videogame narratives exist, it turns out, is very much like trying to prove to someone that God exists. In the end, if that is all you do, you aren't actually accomplishing much. People have very specific and complex notions of what narrative is, and in practical terms, the debate about videogames as narratives is not ontological but qualitative. It isn't enough to provide evidence that videogame narratives exist, because existence alone is not a compelling case for why we should care. It isn't even enough to point out that the cultural significance of videogames is growing every year,

¹ This is not to suggest that using the relatively public forum of a multi-disciplinary conference as a platform to preach about the merits of videogames is without justification. Many who study the medium worry about its portrayal in other contexts as at best useless and at worst dangerous to young minds. Attempting to sway public opinions about videogames with every chance given is a desperate move to stave off the growing support for increased censorship of videogame content—a move that may stunt the growth of the videogame as a narrative and artistic medium.

with more and more people engaging with the interactive worlds they provide. Skeptics will see this as a cultish phenomenon—just because everyone else is drinking the Kool-Aid doesn't mean we all should.

The real issue at hand about whether videogames matter enough to warrant attention from the “non-believers” is whether a videogame can be a vehicle of profound ideas and moving emotional experiences. Those who lambaste games, and think them the worst of low-brow culture tend to dismiss not only current games, but the medium as a whole as incapable of significant artistic worth. What leaves many writing off videogames as inherently inferior as a medium of narrative and artistic expression is the fact that they are games. Many critics point to the choices inherent to players in games as a fundamental limitation of the videogame as a storytelling medium.

It is true that videogame narratives are as much processes as products, designed by game makers to give players the ability to engage in the artificial conflicts of game play within an immersive, narrative-driven game space. While it is crucial that videogame narrative makers carefully create the conditions conducive to immersive narrative-driven game play, game players play an equally important role in the actualization of videogame narratives. But couldn't the same be said for other narrative media? Without a reader, what is a text? Without a spectator, what is a spectacle of film and television? Still, many believe the inherently active role of players in videogames is different; so different in fact that they claim the game maker/game player relationship challenges long established ideas about the relationships between authors, readers, and texts. Because of this, many will not accept the changes produced by player involvement as a valid development of narrative possibilities.

One such curmudgeon is well known film critic Roger Ebert who is infamous within the gaming community for his claims that videogames are inherently inferior to film and literature, and are essentially wastes of time best avoided by discerning consumers. In late 2005, when many watershed videogame narratives had already been released, Ebert wrote of videogames:

I believe the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art. To my knowledge, no one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers...for most gamers, video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic.

Ebert identified what he meant by “the nature of the medium” when he said that “there’s a structural reason for [videogames inferiority]: Video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control.” Ebert’s comments incited a flurry of responses by game players and game makers. Tim Schafer, a videogame designer acclaimed for creating witty, engaging, narrative-driven videogames such as *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990), *Grim Fandango* (1998), and *Psychonauts* (2005) was quick to defend the potential artistic merit of videogames, saying that “Games are art. If Marcel Duchamp can stick a urinal in a gallery and say it’s art, then I’m going to go out on a limb and say *Okami* is too”² (Ochalla 2). Schafer is also one of many who are perplexed by Ebert’s assertion that interactivity is what keeps games from being art: “Ebert says that games can never be art because they’re interactive. Huh? So when you’re watching a play, and it’s one of those plays where they interact with the audience, does it stop being art at that moment? Is that one, particular play not art, but the rest are?” (Ochalla 2).

² *Okami* is an action-adventure game released on the Playstation 2 platform. It has garnered awards and critical praise because of its emotional appeal and beauty.

Ebert's criticisms of videogames garnered him negative attention from the gaming community, but as we briefly covered in Chapter 1, he is merely expressing what many feel—that games and stories just do not mix well. Ebert, a film critic by trade, and someone weaned entirely on more established narrative media, naturally favors narrative as the vehicle of “culture, civilization, and empathy” while dismissing videogames as trivial wastes of times. He bases his opinion, like many similarly minded colleagues, solely on hearsay and the perception of what it must mean for a narrative's artistic integrity when an audience is allowed to participate in it. He admits that he does not play videogames. His limited understanding of their interactive properties is enough for him to make sweeping judgments about their artistic merit.³

Of course, proponents of games would be quick to point out, as Johan Huizinga and others have before, that regardless of their narrative content, games of all kinds play an important role in every culture, and play is vital to our maturation as individuals and as a society. Far from seeing it as a limiting pairing, many consider videogame narratives as potentially the ultimate form of artistic expression. Denis Dyack, founder and president of Silicon Knights—a videogame development studio renowned for producing games with highly compelling narratives—gives a very different opinion from Ebert about the artistic merit of the videogame medium:

I feel video games are probably the most advanced form of art thus far in human history. Not only do video games encompass many of the traditional forms of art (text, sound, video, imagery), but they also uniquely tie these art forms together with interactivity. This allows the art form of video games to create something

³ Ebert restated his criticism of videogames on his blog on July 21, 2007. Responding to Clive Barker's defense of the medium as art against Ebert's earlier comments, Ebert once again insisted that a medium that invites audience input cannot be art, or at least “high art” as he now qualifies it. At the very most, for Ebert, who continues to admit he does not play videogames, the medium can only rise to the level of enjoyable trashy entertainment. It is a fundamentally flawed medium, because it allows players to meddle in it. “If you change it, you become the artists,” says Ebert. And we are not qualified to be artists, or so Ebert suggests. Only the select few geniuses of the world are qualified to make high art. He goes on to say “art seeks to lead you to an inevitable conclusion, not a smorgasbord of choices.” (Ebert).

unique, beyond all other forms of media. Simply expressed, you can put a movie in a video game but you cannot put a video game in a movie. Video games are the ultimate form of art as we know it.

Dyack's claims may seem equally extreme as Ebert's. In this chapter, which explores the relationship between game makers and game players, our goal is not to support Dyack's claims as much as show that Ebert's claims are misguided. While it may not be the be all and end all of artistic expression, as we shall see, the combination of interactivity and narrative can work to create profoundly moving artistic experiences. Even in this early stage of the medium's development, there are, despite Roger Ebert's assertions to the contrary, examples of videogame narratives that are intellectually and emotionally rewarding experiences, worthy of our attention, praise, and consideration. Videogames not only tell stories, but they can do so in an emotionally moving and thought-provoking way. While videogames are a revolutionary form that does challenge our notions of authorial control and the flow of meaning from sender to receiver, the core elements that are essential to narrative communication still exist in a form that allows for artistic expression for game makers and profound narrative experiences for players.

The Role of Game Makers

Our ability to enjoy and learn from narrative hinges on our ability to empathize with others. Empathy is the engine that drives meaningful narrative experiences. Storytelling allows authors to share their perspectives on the world, the people in it, and the various situations people face in the world. It is a way for authors to share with their audiences thoughts and feelings best shared through trying to put their audiences in other places and in different frames of mind—so they can see the world with new eyes, and understand its complexities in new ways. On the other hand, games are essentially experiential. Whereas narrative allows an audience to see and feel what others do, games insist on involvement. The heart of a game is player agency—players

experience a game not just by seeing it, or even by being in it, but by *doing* in it.⁴ The skillful combination of these two elements—empathy and agency—on the part of game makers⁵ is what makes for a compelling, artful videogame narrative. It is through this combination that profound ideas and powerful emotions manifest in videogame narratives.

In his book, *Pause & Effect: The Art of Interactive Narrative*, Mark Meadows says that all authors, regardless of medium, have one thing in common—their desire to share with others a different perspective on the world. Meadows says “this is why narrative exists: to convey perspective” (2). Like Dyack, Meadows sees great potential for the combination of interactivity and narrative, but also great challenges. “Interactive narrative” says Meadows, “is the most ambitious art form existing today because it combines traditional narrative with visual art and interactivity” (2). He defines interactive narrative as “a narrative form that allows someone other than the author to affect, choose, or change the plot. The author, in writing this narrative, allows the reader to interact with the story” (2). He also points out that “this changes the role of the author; it changes what an author does” (2). Indeed, for content creators seeking to express themselves through storytelling, the videogame presents some unusual challenges.

At the forefront is the challenge of how to allow players to interact with the story of the game while maintaining the intended meaning and emotional impact of the story. Or to put it in

⁴ Of course, in their own way, games are just as important as narratives to the enculturation process of a society, but they teach people in a different way. Narratives teach us about ourselves and the world we live in by showing us other people and other places that are both the same and different from the people we know and the situations we face in our daily lives. Games teach us about ourselves and our world by allowing us to play safely within rule-based systems that often parallel the more complex rules of social interactions in our society.

⁵ I use the term *game makers* instead of writers or game designers, because videogames, like films, are commonly created by a team effort. Though it is easier for academics to identify a particular work as the vision of a single-mind—a lone writer using pen and paper or a keyboard to express his or her dreams to the world, or an auteur film maker using all of the tools of film production as a means to produce his or her singular, personal vision—the fact is, most new media works are efforts of collaboration. And even though there is often a lead game designer/director at the helm, orchestrating the team to the end results, to refer to game makers by a specific term that refers to this team leader, or to the lead writer, would be to minimize the collaborative process of videogame creation.

Meadows' terms, how can authors convey their perspective when they are allowing players to change that perspective? After all, that is what critics like Ebert claim is impossible—a videogame maker cannot at the same time make players empathize with a character, and the thoughts and actions of that character, when players have agency over that character. The charge here is that players cannot be fully put in another person's shoes when they are able to control that person and influence the environment that person is in. And since empathy is such an important aspect of evocative narrative, if players cannot empathize with characters in a game, then videogames can never be as culturally useful and compelling as true works of narrative art. Therefore, one of the primary challenges that artistically inclined videogame designers face is how to allow players to empathize with the characters of a game, while allowing players choices and control within the game world.

Ironically, Will Wright, one of the most commercially successful videogame designers in the world, and someone responsible for making games that give players the highest amount of narrative freedom available in the medium, agrees with Ebert on the issue of the importance of empathy in meaningful narratives, and tries to illicit empathy in his videogames (Wright xxxi-xxxii). Wright, the legendary designer of the incredibly popular "Sim" games, such as the many versions of *SimCity* (1989) and *The Sims* (2000) (which we will return to shortly), believes strongly in the game maker's responsibility to combine the agency inherent in videogames with the empathy that makes narrative such a profoundly effective and important means of communication. Will Wright's Sim games are evidence that even in games with seemingly the most extreme limitations on authorial control, it is possible to guide player actions and evoke a wide gamut of feelings in players, including the most essential emotion for narrative—empathy. As we shall see, even in his games, which allow for such an extreme level of player freedom in

terms of the development of a story, it is possible for compelling, evocative, narratives to emerge that are subtly, but fundamentally guided by the game makers' perspective.

Although we will examine how evocative narrative emerges even in the most player controlled game environments, they represent only one type of narrative experience in gaming. The development of emotionally evocative narratives in games did not happen overnight, nor does it take place in only one game genre. Much of the bias against videogames is rooted in critics not recognizing the great diversity of videogames and the evolution of the medium into an ever-expanding number of constantly developing genres. Ask non-gamers what a videogame is, and the most common responses will involve visceral pleasures, fast action, and a reliance on twitch responses rather than reflective thoughtful processes. It is true, that most early videogames and many videogames today fit this description, but as the industry has grown, and the demand for videogames has grown, the types of player experiences offered by the medium have developed as well.

Wright likens this evolution of the industry to the evolution of humanity: "the earliest games appealed primarily to our more primitive instincts. These instincts originate in the central portion of our brain, our so-called 'reptilian' brain stem. Over time, the emotional palette of games has broadened beyond instinctive issues of survival and aggression to include the more subtle mechanisms of empathy, nurturing, and creativity." (xxxix-xxxii). He suggests, as games have developed, so have gamers' tastes. Just as we still have within us the primal urges and desires of our ancestors, many videogames still cater to these urges and desires. But just as we have grown as a species, so too have videogames and their audiences. Videogames are increasingly allowing for both the pleasures of the fast action, reflex-based control that tickles

our “reptilian” core, and the more intellectually and emotionally complex, cerebral and reflective aspects of our nature.

Videogames offer both types of pleasures in various degrees and ratios across a variety of genres. And the increased emphasis on narrative across a wide range of genres is reflective of narrative’s long standing role in developing the more cerebral aspects of our nature. However, the type of narrative pleasures enjoyed in videogames varies depending on the level of control players have on the narrative content in a game. At one end of the narrative spectrum are games that allow players to fundamentally shape or influence major plot points, while at the other end of the spectrum, many other game types exist that are much more restrictive in how much players can affect the course of the narrative. At both extremes, and at every point in between, game makers face different challenges in their efforts to give players as much agency as possible while making them feel as much empathy as possible.

Types of Videogame Narratives

Emergent Games

Videogame makers have developed an increasingly wide array of games that focus on the pleasures of narrative-driven, empathetic-based game play. We can place videogames with inherent narrativity on a continuum based on the amount of control players are given in the development of narrative content.⁶ On the one extreme are those games that allow a maximum amount of player agency within a created game space in terms of the flow and development of

⁶ Narrativity is the term narrative and media theorist Marie-Laure Ryan has given texts or situations that can evoke narrative scripts. She says of narrativity in *Narrative Across Media: The Language of Storytelling* that “in addition to life itself, pictures, music, or dance can have narrativity without being narratives in the literal sense...the fullest form of narrativity occurs when the text is both intended as narrative and possesses sufficient narrativity to be constructed as such” (9). My focus is on videogames with a high degree of narrativity—that is, those games both intended and received as narratives.

narrative.⁷ Games on this end of the spectrum are commonly referred to in academic circles as emphasizing *emergent* game play. In the industry, they are sometimes referred to as “god” games, because of the extreme control players have over the game world and its inhabitants, and they are also sometimes referred to as “sandbox” games, because players can play freely within them without worrying about game makers forcing them forward through the narrative. These games most often focus on giving players a world filled with narrative possibilities rather than narrative inevitabilities. Because they allow for such a wide array of narrative choices, these games most often do not emphasize pre-scripted dialogue or pre-rendered cut-scenes. Most or all narrative emerges in the game in real time as the player moves through the game world.

Henry Jenkins says of emergent narrative elements in videogames that they are “not prestructured or preprogrammed...yet they are not as unstructured, chaotic, and frustrating as life itself” (128). The most popular “god/sandbox” games are Will Wright’s virtual world simulators (and their many clones), like the more macro-structured focused *SimCity* (1989), which focuses on building and managing a city, and the more micro-structured focused *The Sims* (2000), which focuses on building and managing one avatar’s life. In these games, players are given a high degree of narrative agency. The appeal of these games is that players are given the opportunity to create their own unique narrative-gaming experiences. Jenkins says of these games that “players can define their own goals and write their own stories” (128). This sort of freedom represents the highest degree of player control in a game possessing narrativity, and thus the most radical break with other narrative media in terms of the type of control exerted by an audience. But even here, the author is not completely absent.

⁷ Note that games on this end of the spectrum do not necessarily give players more control in the game overall; the distinction here simply focuses on agency in terms of the direction of narrative content. Games at the other end of the spectrum restrict the development of plot elements, but may give as much or more control to the player in the ways they interact with the game world in ways that do not alter the direction of the narrative progression.

Even in these games, which represent the ultimate in player control, there are choices that the game designers make that influence the types of narrative experiences that can emerge. Game designers still choose the overall look and feel of the game world; they choose what sort of characters can populate that game world and what sort of actions can and cannot be performed in that world. There are also built in consequences for player actions that encourage them to act in one way and not another. In short, even in the most opened-ended simulation games, the author of the game is present, subtly controlling the flow of the game. For instance, in Will Wright's games, players are given the option to manipulate the game space in profound ways, but the feedback from the games' avatars to a large degree determines what the player does. In *The Sims*, for instance, players can take on the role of a malevolent or benevolent god. If players choose to be cruel, they can create a space for their avatars that will cause them perceived pain and suffering. They can make a house without a bathroom, or kitchen, or bedroom; they can choose not to manage the avatar's cleanliness, financial worth, and possessions, causing chaos and misery for the avatar. This lowers the avatar's various stats, including its "fun level bar," making it depressed. In this scenario, the player acts very much like God in *The Book of Job*, seeing how much misery the player's avatar can take. Just like Job though, no matter how depressed an avatar gets, it will not take its own life. But players can kill their avatars in more indirect ways. They can starve them to death. They can cause them to die of disease by not cleaning up the avatars' environment. They can also treat their avatars so badly that the avatars may leave and not come back.

Some players enjoy doing these things, generally because these freedoms are so rare in the medium (most narrative driven games are much more tightly and overtly controlled by the games' authors), but even in "god" games, this freedom is limited. Avatars in *The Sims* have a

certain amount of free will. There are some things you cannot make an avatar do in the game world (like commit suicide). While many players explore their dark side by treating their avatars badly, this sort of play style becomes boring quickly, as a depressed avatar leaves a rather uneventful life. It is also far easier for a player to treat an avatar poorly, or simply ignore it, than to guide it toward happiness and success. As players explore the game world more, the intent of the game becomes clear—the challenge of the game, if players choose to treat the program as such, is to make the avatars successful and happy. This requires a great deal of micromanagement by players, who must ensure their avatars are clean, healthy, and financially secure. Because having avatars succeed is the most challenging aspect of the program, players wishing to play the program as a game that challenges them, eventually learn to steer toward creating an environment where the characters in the game thrive.

Players of *The Sims* often treat the simulation as a game, with the winning goal state the sustained happiness of the player's avatar (Figure 3-1). Making the players' avatar happy involves sending the avatars to work, interacting with computer controlled non-player characters (NPCs), and acquiring new possessions for the avatars. This increases the avatars' "fun level bar" and makes for an overall more pleasant play experience for players, since severe avatar depression increasingly limits the players control over the avatars and the variety of actions the avatars can perform. In essence, the more players help their avatars be happy, the more freedom they have when controlling their avatars. New challenges emerge, and the game slowly develops a higher degree of narrativity. Happy and healthy avatars can get married and adopt children or pets. Players can also have their avatars do immoral things, like try to seduce a neighbor's wife or husband, but this most often has negative consequences. In short, players are encouraged to develop their avatars into success stories by acting morally.

Positive goal states in the game require moral actions and the acquisition of resources and possessions. It all amounts to players striving to achieve Wright's version of the American dream of success and well-being in a capitalist society. The result is that players can put hundreds of hours into their characters, investing not only huge amounts of time into the game, but a lot of emotion too. Players often feel happy when their avatars are successful, and upset when their avatars fail. Players are encouraged to act helpfully toward their avatars, and are shown the consequences of not acting responsibly. Although at first it may seem as though the players' choices prohibit authorial control, players are actually rather limited in the actions they can take in these games, and they are encouraged to develop successful avatars by acting morally (defined by the very clear models of behavior implicit in the games socio-political worldview). The program may appear to allow for a tremendous amount of player freedom, but the players' actions are constrained, and when players engage in the program as a videogame narrative, the moral and message is clear. The result is emergent narrative content that clearly embodies the game makers' messages, and also can have a profound emotional impact on players. These games are like twenty-first century Horatio Alger tales, inspiring new generations to work hard and achieve happiness through morally obtained financial success.⁸

Progression Games

While games that give players such a high degree of freedom are attractive to many gamers, they can be frustrating for game makers who want greater control over the development

⁸ Using Horatio Alger as a point of comparison with these videogames is perhaps a strategic blunder, since critics like Ebert would hardly consider Alger a narrative "artist." However, I defend the comparison on two fronts: 1. Alger rivaled Mark Twain in popularity as a late-nineteenth century writer, and while Twain's wit and perspective has proven to be far more enduring than Alger's simplistic, naïve meritocracy driven pulp, Alger nonetheless made as many young minds of his time think and feel. 2. I will concede that games on this end of the spectrum, which allow for the most player freedom in determining the course and outcome of the game's narrative, are generally the most artistically uneven videogame narratives, but they still can be thought-provoking, emotionally engaging narrative experiences.

of more specific narratives. Games like *The Sims* can define the conditions necessary for narratives to develop along certain general paths, but they cannot guarantee that narratives will develop in the ways the game makers intend, nor can they allow for the storytelling nuances that are available when game makers use more tightly controlled storytelling techniques typical to other narrative media. If game makers want to tell a specific story rather than allow for specific kinds of stories to develop in their games, then they generally create games that more closely resemble their narrative cousins in other media. These games, at the opposite end of the gaming spectrum from emergent games, are what ludologist Jesper Juul calls *progression* games. As we shall see, despite Ebert's assumptions, many games do not allow players to drastically affect key plot points. These games funnel players along pre-determined plotlines, and try to compensate by giving players agency in ways that do not alter the course of the narrative.

“In progression games,” says Juul, “the player has to perform a predefined set of actions in order to complete the game” (5). Progression games give game makers more control over the presentation and progression of narrative content, as Juul points out: “the progression structure yields strong control to the game designer: Since the designer controls the sequence of events, this is also where we find the games with cinematic or storytelling ambitions (5). Juul's term and definition provide us with a useful contrast to emergent games; however, his segregation of narrative content into only progression games runs counter to our previous examination of how emergent videogame narrative works. Juul also focuses his discussion of progression games almost exclusively on one game genre—adventure games. Progression games are a relatively new type of game, according to Juul, with the first examples of the game type arising with computer generated adventure games (71-73).

Juul uses the term in a highly restrictive and pejorative sense, contrasting the rich, ancient history of emergent games, which are complex and open-ended, with the severely limited in form and content progressive games that he identifies as being temporally and spatially linear, and, thematically, traditionally derivative of the fantasy conventions of J.R. Tolkien. (71). He does identify two additional game types—hybrids of emergent and progressive game play. The first is the progressive game with emergent components and the second is the emergent game with progressive components (71-72).

In general, Juul focuses his work on emergent games, as do most ludologists. The bias is understandable, since ludologists tend to favor player-centered games, and they often label progressive games as creator-centered. They also align progressive games more closely with other narrative media, and see the development of progressive games as game makers pretending to be filmmakers. While it is true that games that emphasize progression through a narrative do allow game makers to have a level of authorial control that we are used to seeing in other narrative media, dismissing games with a strong progressive focus as less game-like and less focused on the desires of gamers is misguided.

First, as we established in Chapter 2, all games are in some basic respects inherently progressive—the rule based progression toward goal states is what separates games from unstructured play. Second, to suggest that game makers who make progressive games are indulging in their desires to be film makers at the expense of players is to ignore the commercial success of these games and the enjoyment players report in playing them. Finally, as Juul himself points out by introducing the notion of two emergent-progressive hybrids, most games are not one or the other; they contain both emergent and progressive elements—an arrangement determined not just by game makers, but by player demands and institutional pressures.

However, since our current analysis is on contrasting the roles of game makers at extreme ends of the spectrum, let us examine the sorts of games game makers develop when they want the most control over the sequencing of a narrative—progression games.

Although Juul identifies adventure games as the only pure progression games, several game genres are now dominated by narrative-driven progressive game play. The most popular and pronounced progressive narrative-driven genre is the console (or Japanese) role-playing game.⁹ The primary appeal of console role-playing games is generally strong, author controlled storytelling, combined with interesting, strategy-based battle systems that pit the players against antagonists that try to stop their avatars' progression in the game's story. As we shall explore more thoroughly in Chapter 5, Juul is correct in his assessment that progression games such as these typically borrow heavily from fantasy and science fiction themes and generally follow the prototypical quest narrative structure as outlined by theorists such as Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of the Folk Tale*; however, our assessment of these games will not begin by assuming this is an inherent liability to their artistic merits as narratives, games, or game-narratives.

Since their birth on the Nintendo Entertainment System with games such as *Dragon Warrior* (1986) and *Final Fantasy* (1987), console role-playing games have become increasingly epic in scale and complexity, managing to innovate even as they conform to strict genre conventions. It is true that they are, traditionally, tightly controlled narrative-based gaming experiences that involve a lot of cut-scenes and in-game dialogue and story development. In

⁹ The distinction between PC and console role-playing games, sometimes also contrasted by the monikers Western and Japanese role-playing games (which may be a more accurate distinction now that many PC role-playing games are making their way to consoles, especially the Xbox and Xbox 360) involves fundamentally different attitudes toward the balance between player agency and authorial control. PC role-playing games are generally far more open ended and nonlinear, emphasizing emergent narrative elements whereas console role-playing games are far more linear and author controlled, emphasizing progressive narrative elements. The distinction is more thoroughly discussed in the role-playing games section of Chapter 5.

fact, it is not uncommon for a single cinematic in recent console role-playing games to last as long as a sit-com or the printed script length to exceed the word count of a Harry Potter novel.¹⁰ In this, they represent a stark contrast from the more open-ended, emergent simulation games at the other end of the spectrum that we have already briefly touched on, and are even quite different from the more open-ended role-playing games typically developed in the United States and Europe for the PC. In traditional console role-playing games, players have very little control over the direction and development of the plot. Players may influence minor plot points and may shift a story arc along a few branching paths, but by and large, in these games, players do not co-author the narrative as much as enact predetermined narrative scripts. The extent to which we can call these games “interactive narratives” as it is defined by Mark Meadows and others is debatable, since players cannot alter the narrative content in profound ways beyond failing to progress along the predetermined paths set forth. However, what is undeniable is the popularity of these games and the enjoyment players get from overcoming the challenges put forth by the game as they progress along these predetermined narrative paths.

Perhaps because game makers working in the genre can use many of the narrative techniques of film, novels, and comics, console role-playing games are frequently identified by game players and game critics alike as having the most complex and emotionally engaging narratives. In one survey of 535 gamers about the role of emotion in gaming titled “Videogames Make you Cry?,” single player role-playing games ranked as the most emotionally powerful by

¹⁰ For many game writers and lead designers, the evolution of videogames as a narrative medium means a move away from other media, which means a move away from cut-scenes and single narrative paths. Peter Molyneux is one game writer/designer who believes videogame narratives should have fewer cut-scenes and more choices. This has meant that while the first *Fable* game had about 20,000 lines of dialogue, *Fable 2* is projected to have about 250,000 lines of dialogue. Because of the current limitations of language AI programs and the limited resources of most development teams, the extent to which such a move toward more narrative freedom in videogame is feasible is still very much in debate (Mitchell).

a wide margin (Bowen).¹¹ The primary reason cited for the high emotional involvement in RPGs is the depth and breadth of the stories, which typically expand over several dozens of hours of game play.¹² Whereas the main challenge for emergent videogame makers is how to subtly direct the general direction of narrative possibilities, the main challenge for progression videogame makers is attempting to integrate the game play and narrative elements effectively enough to keep players compelled to follow a relatively restrictive narrative path for dozens or hundreds of hours, over many play sessions, without becoming so bored and frustrated by the lack of explorative possibilities that they stop playing the game.

One of the ways this is accomplished in console role-playing games is through the integration of an interesting battle system that challenges players and gives them a narrative motivation to fight foes and overcome obstacles within the game world. As noted earlier, this is typically done by setting up the narrative with an opening cut-scene or a printed back-story that identifies to players the reason their avatars are embarking on their particular quest and why the quest matters in the game world. If this is done effectively, players will grow more and more invested in trying to overcome the challenges put in front of them to ensure their avatars continue in the story toward the desired goal state, whether that be the restoration of peace, the saving of a family member or group, or any number of plot devices typical to the quest stories that dominate fantasy and science fiction literature, film, and comics.

¹¹ Interestingly, Massively-multiplayer role-playing games, which are growing in popularity and scholarly buzz ranked almost as the bottom of the list, behind shooters, action, adventure, fighting, and sport games. The implication from these findings is that the focus of these online games is less on story than level grinding and social interactions at this stage in their development (Bowen).

¹² Role-playing games are, as a whole, the longest single-player progressive games, with some games taking hundreds of hours to complete. As a point of comparison, a single play through of a typical adventure or action game takes 10-15 hours for most players to complete.

The appeal of these games for players is the promise of a rich, engaging, epic storyline, and fun game play that makes players feel they are contributing to the game characters' overcoming of obstacles. Players expect an emotional payoff in the form of eventual success for the characters they have helped along a long, arduous journey. Generally, this involves players defeating monsters and villains, vanquishing them or killing them, depending on the target market for the game, but early in the genre's development, rarely did players face genuine loss. Because of this, one of the most shocking moments in videogame narrative history occurs in the watershed console role-playing game for the Playstation, *Final Fantasy VII* (1997), widely considered to be one of the best videogame narratives ever made. In the aforementioned survey of 535 gamers about emotion and gaming, by far the single most frequently mentioned moment was the death of Aeris in *Final Fantasy VII* (Bowen). In a genre driven by a sense of player accomplishment and joy in defeating the "bad guys," and in a franchise that came to define the genre, for the first time, many gamers experienced a sense of true loss in a game. The scene is widely cited by gamers of the time as being the first time a videogame made them cry in response to the story of the game.

Death has always been commonplace in videogames, but for the most part, the experience of death does not register with much emotional charge for players. Death in videogames very often occurs to beings almost entirely "Other" to players. Those that die in videogames are most often objectified, flat, villains—characters that are as often as not aliens, monsters, or humans safely demarcated as evil, such as Nazis or murders. Or else, they are merely set pieces, not fleshed out at all—characters that have little to no humanizing characteristics.¹³ But Aeris is different. Her character is carefully cultivated by the game's

¹³ The dehumanization of enemies in videogames has at times sparked debate and controversy in and out of the gaming community. The most recent game to have given rise to concern over this tendency is not due for release

writers, the game's character designers, and the game's lead designer to illicit strong feelings of protectiveness from the player.

First, Aeris is given charming, flirtatious, witty lines of dialogue. She is also designed to be the most innocent looking companion and ally in the player's fight against the evil megacorporation/de facto government Shinra, which is destroying the world by mining from its core what becomes the game world's primary power supply—mako.¹⁴ Her character is introduced as a flower peddler, with no fighting skill, wearing a modest pink dress that contrasts with the edgy clothing of the other female main character, Tifa, who wears a short miniskirt and who is an expert in martial arts. Aeris appears naïve and helpless when the player first meets her in the game, with the player being called on to defend her the first time they meet. After the initial battle, she asks the player's avatar to be her bodyguard. But as the story progresses, her background reveals that she has a noble history and is to play an important part in battles to come. As the story progresses, the player learns how important Aeris is to everyone in the game. She is being pursued by the enemy relentlessly, and much of the game play early in the game revolves around protecting Aeris, or saving her from capture.

until late 2008—*Resident Evil 5*. The Resident Evil series is the most successful franchise in the survival horror subgenre. The enemies in all of the games are primarily highly aggressive, soulless, infected zombies for whom players feel little remorse as they shoot them in self-defense. However, the early videos for *Resident Evil 5* have sparked debate among gamers about the negative impact of the dehumanization typical to videogame villains. The videos show a white protagonist gunning down infected African villagers. Bonnie Ruberg, in an article for *The Village Voice*, points out several disturbing aspects of the scenes. Not the least of her concerns are that people become zombies by being infected by as little as a single drop of blood, which he notes echoes the fears we have over HIV/AIDS spreading from Africa, and also parallels the fears over racial impurity in the slavery and Jim Crow era in the United States (Ruberg). All of this merely highlights the sometimes disturbingly evocative power of the medium.

¹⁴ Mako is a substance extracted from the earth in a highly destructive manner, and on which the world has become almost entirely dependent—both as an energy source for their machinery, and, in a refined state called materia, as a means of imbuing individuals with superhuman powers. Shinra uses materia to make an army of super soldiers and takes over the world. The player's character and his allies, including Aeris, are part of an eco-terrorist group called AVALANCHE, who tries to stop Shinra before they unwittingly deplete the planet of all its life essence, which would mean the end of all life on the planet.

Compelled to learn an ancient spell that will save the planet, which is both being depleted of its life essence and being threaten even more urgently by the main antagonist of the game (Sephiroth),¹⁵ she goes off on her own. This selfless and daring act does not go unpunished as she is soon discovered by Sephiroth, whose own ambitions for god-like power require that he stop Aeris and ultimately destroy the planet. The players' avatar, the mercenary Cloud Strife, who is the main protagonist of the *Final Fantasy VII*, soon appears on the scene, but he cannot stop Sephiroth, who after a failed attempt to use mind control to force Cloud to kill Aeris, shockingly stabs Aeris through the back with his sword (Figure 3-2). Players cannot intervene in this death scene. Control is ripped from them at the most crucial moment. It is a pre-scripted event that cannot be averted. Not until it is over is control given back to the player so players can attempt to enact revenge on Aeris' killer, who summons a creature to fight for him as he escapes, delaying the gratification of revenge, and driving players onward in the game with renewed vigor.

Many players became deeply upset by Aeris' death when the game was first released. The level of care and skill given to the development of Aeris as an innocent, noble young woman was with few precedents. The character was slowly developed in the game over many hours of play time. At the point of her murder, the player had spent many hours growing attached to her as a valuable ally and as a witty, humorous character. Until this point in the game, every time Aeris had been threatened, the player could help save her. It quickly became a convention of the

¹⁵ While Shinra is the primary antagonist at the beginning of the game, Sephiroth emerges as the more pressing threat to the planet. Shinra's misdeeds are driven more by blind greed and corruptions. Sephiroth, on the other hand, knows exactly what he is doing and what the consequences of his actions are. Sephiroth is also a far more emotionally engaging enemy for players because whereas Shinra is a large corporation, Sephiroth is a single character to whom players can direct their anger and aggression toward. Whereas the faceless hordes are dispatched with little emotion, the desire to defeat one elusive, well-developed villain is a powerful narrative motivator in the game. Chapter, level, and game endings culminating in emotionally rewarding "boss battles" such as the one that ends *Final Fantasy VII* have long been a staple of the medium, because they are so effective as narrative resolution carrots driving players forward through a game.

game that Aeris would be threatened and the player would help save her. Her sudden, unavoidable death made for a watershed moment in videogame narrative history.

Good writing and thoughtful character development combined with the higher level of graphical and auditory fidelity made possible by new console technology in *Final Fantasy VII* to give many players a new perspective on the narrative possibilities of videogames. Players were not used to facing such a traumatic event in a game, which they could not avert, no matter how they played and what they did. No amount of planning or skill could alter the event, just as no amount of wanting can stop Hamlet's death, or Dumbledore's. Bowen quotes one player he interviewed—a father who played the game with his two young sons—who was hit particularly hard by the moment: “For months, we couldn't even listen to the musical theme ... without one of the boys bursting into tears” (Bowen). Even years later, for some, just hearing the theme music playing in that scene is enough to bring immediate melancholy.

As these examples show, the medium of the videogame can allow videogame makers to express profound ideas and create moving emotional experiences for players in ways that are sometimes very different from and sometimes very similar to other narrative media. It has proven to be an effective medium for artistic expressions of all types, including storytelling, despite the assertions to the contrary of the many videogame critics like Roger Ebert. Ebert and like-minded critics have a naïve understanding of authorial control in videogames which suggests that because videogames insist on player input, that videogames are not controlled by their makers. The reality is that player choices do not necessarily minimize authorial control; they just change the nature of that control. Interactivity does not destroy this aspect of narrative, and history proves that point.

As game designer Tim Shafer alludes to when he brings up the example of interactive stage productions, and as we shall cover in more detail in Chapter 4, other media have long included interactivity. Videogames are not entirely new in this regard, and there are ample precedents for authors having to adapt to an active, participating audience without losing their ability to direct plot progression and maintain the integrity of the messages, morals, and meanings of their texts. The fact is that videogame makers are still, on a whole, very much in control of videogame narratives, allowing them to express their ideas and provide deeply moving experiences for players. The type of control, and the level of that control, however, varies, depending on what the author chooses to allow players to do, and to what extent they allow player actions to affect the progression of the narrative. While these choices often conform to genre conventions that have developed in the medium, videogame makers are still in control of their messages, and they also determine how much control they want to give to the players, and how that affects their content.

The Role of Players

Just as the game becomes a text for the user at the time of playing, so, it can be argued, does the user become a text for the game, since they exchange and react to each other's messages according to a set of codes. The game plays the user just as the user plays the game, and there is no message apart from the play.

—Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*

When composers write symphonies, when playwrights write plays, or when choreographers develop the steps of dances, they do so knowing that their efforts will not come to life for an audience until musicians play, actors act, and dancers dance. Composers and musicians, playwrights and actors, choreographers and dancers—all are co-creators of art and entertainment. This relationship is not unusual, especially in the multimodal worlds of new

media production. In fact, it is rare today to find a form of art or entertainment that does not involve some sort of collaboration and co-creation. In all major entertainment multimedia, we find this collaboration, as individuals of different talents combine their efforts to express their perspectives on various issues and give pleasure to others. But what happens when the audience becomes a collaborator? What happens when a player of a game is required to perform in order for a story to progress? In the previous sections of this chapter, we began to examine some ways game makers try to create experiences that are both fun games and compelling narratives. In this section, we will begin to examine how players contribute to the emergence and enactment of videogame narratives.

As Espen Aarseth points out, the user, or player, is as much played by the game as the game is played by the player. It is crucial to the success of a videogame for players to be able to learn from the game how to play it. At its core, then, every videogame is a learning experience and one of the primary tasks for players is to learn how to engage the elements of the game and the rules of the game-world. The game-world is programmed to react to players and players are in turn conditioned to react to the game. The player and the game interface to form a feedback loop from which the gaming experience emerges. In the case of videogame narratives, this feedback loop leads to the emergences and/or enactment on a story.

All of this interaction occurs between the players and the game without game makers being present to ensure this interaction is being done the way they intended. Unlike a director guiding a cast of actors, videogame makers are not present with players to ensure that they are playing their parts in a specific way. However, they do provide both explicit and implicit directions for players to follow in the hopes that their creative efforts will be realized by the players. As we have established, videogames are, like all games, rule-based systems of

representation. Some games emphasize emergent game play and rely on players to infer or create their own rules to transform the computer mediated play-space of the program to a computer mediated game-space. Other games are more strictly defined and controlled by the game designers. In these games, players have less freedom in terms of how the game progresses, but they still play a vital role in that progression.

Regardless of whether a game emphasizes emergent or progressive game play, however, all games, if they are to be played as such, require that players learn their rules. The core rules that govern a game world are typically explicitly spelled out to players in a game manual, or they are explained to players in either a game tutorial mode, or within a learning system integrated into the story of the game. But even after players familiarize themselves with the basic mechanics of a game, they are often required to continually learn new aspects of the game as they continue to play. In fact, most videogames can be described as continual learning programs in which players are gradually given more information about how to master the game world.

In most types of games, this is how interest in the game world is maintained. If players had the ability and knowledge to master a game world right away, the experience would quickly lose its appeal. A well designed videogame is like a good parent who wants to let her child eventually beat her at the game, but plays well enough to make the game a challenge for the child, and makes sure that the child will only eventually win if the child learns how to play better. Many games have variable difficulty levels so that the game program can adapt to each player to maintain this optimum balance of failure and success. But even games played on the “easy” setting require several levels of effort on the part of players.

Videogame makers rely on players to go through the often difficult and confusing process of learning how to play the game. For gaming novices, this process can be particularly

challenging, because even though much is explained in the game's manual, not everything is always spelled out for players. The videogame industry is often chided from within and from those outside the gaming community for its over-reliance on genre conventions, formulas, and clichés. However, videogame makers continue to rely on these genre conventions, formulas, and clichés, because building on what seasoned players already expect allows them to create more complex and rewarding games. Players are expected to bring to most videogames preexisting knowledge of how the game will be played, based upon its affiliations with existing genres.¹⁶ While not all players will fully know all of the gaming conventions of a particular genre, players quickly begin to see patterns in how games are presented and patterns about what is expected from the player for the game to move forward.

The challenge for any videogame maker is to make these patterns comprehensible to a player, but the particular challenge of a videogame narrative maker is to align these game play patterns with narrative actions, and to keep players interested in performing these actions within a narrative context. Without player interest, a game cannot go forward, so first and foremost, a game must be a compelling play experience to be successful. But—as I have repeatedly stressed—to be successful as a videogame *narrative*, the game play must be compelling within a narrative context. Ideally, this is achieved by aligning the game play challenges with narrative actions that players want to experience as such. For instance, in *Final Fantasy VII*, the challenges a player overcomes through game play are challenges the player's avatar must overcome in the game's story (Figure 3-3). Players are made to feel emotionally connected to the game's characters, and are motivated to continue on through the game for dozens and dozens

¹⁶ The exceptions to this tendency of relying on preexisting knowledge of genre conventions are children's games and games created within a genre to purposely appeal to a broader audience. Such games are typically not enjoyed by veteran players who find their handholding tiresome.

of hours of battles and puzzling obstacles, because they care about their part in the progression of the story, and want to see the characters' journey through to the end. The effort exerted by players makes them care about the progress of the game even more.

However, despite the efforts of game makers, not all game players play their games the same way. While I have tried to show that the videogame can be an engaging narrative medium, and while many players enjoy playing videogames because of the unique combination of play and narrative that they provide, not all players always want both a game and a narrative at the same time. And because game makers and publishers want to ensure as many sales as possible, in most games, the narrative is like a lizard's detachable tail—something that the game can survive without if the need arises (Figure 3-4).

While it is not as simple as saying that there are two types of videogame players—those who care about the story and those who don't—we can say that at the most basic level, these represent the two extreme attitudes of videogame players. In any given game, depending on how interested a player is in the story of that game, he or she may switch between someone who is playing a videogame narrative to someone who is merely playing a videogame with disposable narrative content, and vice versa. But for categorical purposes, let us put forth these two basic player types—Narrativist and Gamists/Simulationists¹⁷—as representing the extreme ends of narrative as a play motivator in videogames.¹⁸

¹⁷ These terms have been borrowed from the GNS Theory of Ron Edwards, but my usage of the terms does not match exactly with his. The GNS (Gamism, Narrativism, Simulationism) Theory was developed by Ron Edwards to broadly categorize the three main player types of role-playing games. While these terms as they were originally used do not fit precisely with my story-no story dichotomy, nor were they intended to be applied to player types of all game genres, these terms do fit well with most videogame narratives. Because of this, I have appropriated the terms and conflated Gamism and Simulationism to suit my needs, and to avoid needless neologisms.

¹⁸ The above scene is why many game designers are working with game writers to integrate the story elements and game play more thoroughly—using fewer cut-scenes, giving players more options, and generally trying to more fully integrate narrative and game play. This, unfortunately, involves much more work for writers, but despite the

Gamists play a game primarily to overcome the challenges of the game in the most efficient way possible. Gamists enjoy the challenges of the game for their own sake, without needing to feel as though they are playing through a narrative. The extent of their narrative involvement in a videogame narrative is just to the point at which understanding character motivations and plot progression helps them overcome the game challenges more efficiently. Where narrative content is considered superfluous to efficient game play, it is skipped over or ignored.

Like gamists, simulationists treat narrative motivators as secondary when making game play decisions. Simulationists' primary enjoyment comes from the experience of being in a simulated world in which they may explore and act with as much freedom as possible. When game progression is required, simulationists generally treat each challenge as realistically as possible within the game setting. As is the case with gamists, this may involve considering the narrative context of the game, but simulationists do not enjoy playing a character in a story as much as they enjoy controlling an avatar in the game world. For both gamists and simulationists, to the extent that it is possible in a given game, game play takes precedence over narrative. Gamists try to see the most efficient way to progress through a game, and simulationists try to see the most realistic way to progress through a game, or they may just enjoy exploring the game world as a virtual space.

Narrativists, on the other hand, are motivated by the advancement of the game's plot. Narrativists will identify with their avatars and invest themselves emotionally in the characters' motivations. These emotions will be the primary motivators for their decisions as they progress in the game, and be the primary reason why they continue on in a game, despite its difficulty.

increased workload, it is one of the main ways videogame narratives are evolving. We will explore these developments more thoroughly in Chapter 6.

Just as a gamist will tolerate the story of a game only to the extent that it proves useful to learning how to play the game more effectively, narrativists often tolerate game play only to the extent that it allows them to continue on in the story. If the game play proves too difficult or tedious, a narrativist may choose to skip over it by using cheat codes, if they are available, just as a gamist might choose to skip over cut-scenes and skip past dialogue. Ideally, of course, both the narrative and the game play will be equally compelling and engaging for players, but sometimes the appeal of both for the player is unbalanced. In extreme cases, a Narrativist will plug along in a game he or she finds tedious just to advance the story. However, in a well executed videogame narrative, a player will find both story elements and game play elements rewarding.

It must be remembered that all three of these categories are simply rough approximations of actual player types; real world players are typically a combination of various degrees of all three of these player types. Players may also alternate between these categories from game to game, depending on their mood, and on the strengths of the game. In the latter case, many videogames claim to be interactive narrative experiences, but discourage narrativist behavior by offering compelling game play challenges, or a beautiful game world filled with exploratory possibilities, but weak, poorly implemented narrative content. It is difficult, in these games, for players to care about the characters in the game and about their avatars progressing through the plot. But again, this is not a failure of the medium as a whole; it is simply an example of game makers either not being able to integrate narrative content effectively, or not caring about integrating narrative content, because they are choosing to cater only to gamist and simulationist play styles. However, as the examples discussed so far have shown, there are videogames in which narrative and game elements are integrated successfully, allowing players to experience an evocative videogame narrative. These games can be entertaining for all player types, but if

played by someone willing to expend the effort to play the game as a game and a story, the experience can be as moving and thought-provoking in its own way as any in other narrative media.



Figure 3-1. A successful Sim relaxes in her Jacuzzi while her maid looks thoughtfully into the mirror.



Figure 3-2. As the musical group *The Monkeys* put it, “I saw her face, now I’m a believer.” Seeing Aeris’ face as she died in this death scene from *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) made many gamers into believers of the videogame as an evocative narrative medium.



Figure 3-3. Cloud battles Shinra forces on his own this time, though he typically has allies.



Figure 3-4. Penny Arcade's Web-comic from October 7, 2005 titled "We Were Playing The Second Digital Devil Saga" highlights two opposing player styles. One is conducive to the actualization of videogame narrative and the other is not. Can you guess which is which?

CHAPTER 4
VIDEOGAME REMEDIATIONS: CONNECTIONS TO OTHER NARRATIVE MEDIA

Familiar Bloodlines

The first generations of videogame players have grown up, and the industry has grown to keep them playing and buying their products. The market has responded to the expanding audience by increasing the ways that potential players have of playing and buying games. In addition to four major current generation videogame platforms in the home (PC, Xbox 360, Playstation 3, and Wii—all of which include services for players to play both newly released games and re-released classic arcade and console games) and dozens of other older consoles, plug and play devices, retro consoles, and arcade units, there are a variety of portable videogame platforms that have exploded in popularity in recent years. With each passing day, one is increasingly likely to see or be someone standing in line, or sitting on a bus or in a coffee shop, playing a videogame on his or her cell phone or on a dedicated portable gaming device such as the Nintendo DS or the Playstation Portable.

To make all of these sometimes competing and sometimes complementary gaming platforms viable consumer options, hundreds of videogames are released each year for each of these gaming platforms from major videogame companies, and hundreds more are released by independent creators and homebrew hackers. As products continue to be released in a competitive but highly lucrative market, dozens of game genres and sub-genres have codified, with new genres continuing to emerge each year, all seeking to appeal to some segment of the expanding market place, or reach out to further expand the gaming audience. The videogame industry has long sought to extend its market from the avid, but relatively small demographic of adolescent males, and a confluence of events, including the aforementioned maturation of the first generations of gamers, coupled with continued technical advancements in both home and

mobile gaming, and new marketing strategies by videogame companies designed to target a wider audience (most notable among them, the incredibly successful “blue ocean” strategy of Nintendo) have succeeded in expanding both gaming demographics and our notions of what a videogame is and can be.¹ Never before has there been such a diversity of videogame options, and such a diversity of videogame players.²

With the expanding market, and the proliferation of videogame genres to fulfill the desires of the expanding market, a refreshing trend of positive news stories has emerged. Local news media and national outlets alike have picked up on stories of entire communities of senior citizens playing Wii Sports or games branded as “Touch Generations” titles by Nintendo for their DS (games such as the wildly popular *Brain Age*, which are specifically priced and marketed to casual and older gamers) to help them stay physically and mentally fit. Every couple of weeks, another story about the communal fun of playing *Guitar Hero III* or *Rock Band* with friends and family emerges, along with an update on which celebrities have jumped on board to becoming virtual rock deities. Perhaps most surprisingly, the news writers and news anchors seem less frequently clueless about these new games and new ways of playing—a sure sign that videogames are finally becoming entertainment options not just for a small segment of society to be reported on, so that the rest of society can be amused and amazed by what “gamers” are doing, but for society as a whole, including the reporters themselves.

¹ With the release of the Wii, Nintendo outlined to shareholders what they identified as a “Blue Ocean Strategy,” based on the influential book of the same name. They emphasized that with the DS and the Wii, they were no longer trying to compete with their competitors, but instead sought to expand into the largely uncontested market place of casual and “non-gamers.” The success of the DS and the Wii is in large part a testament to the success of this strategy.

² Nielsen Media Research data from 2007 shows an increased penetration of videogames in American households of 18%, and a greater diversity of videogame players in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity (Nielsen).

However, videogames have yet to reach such a level of ubiquity and acceptance that they are immune to the sort of fear-mongering and knee-jerk reactionism that has dominated news media coverage, political campaign speeches, and editorials of the guardians of old media since videogames' initial rise to cultural prominence in the 1980s. Nor have they gained very much ground in more high-brow cultural circles—the opera and art house crowds. To many of the former group, videogames remain a medium dominated by violence and a negative influence on today's youth.³ To many of the latter group, videogames are like a boorish *nouveau riche* family with poor taste moving into the media neighborhood, drawing undue attention to themselves with garish décor and ostentatious actions that distract people from a more refined, sophisticated media landscape. As highlighted in Chapter 3, some critics still insist that not only do videogames, as a whole, cater to our basest emotions and desires, but also that they are incapable of aspiring to the levels of artistic and narrative expression that give other narrative media, at their best, a deeper cultural purpose and function.

Many within the videogame community, including noted videogame scholars, agree with the premise that most of the mass-marketed products that dominate store shelves predictably emphasize entertainment over pushing boundaries of thought and reflection in the way that only art can. However, this is typical of mass entertainment media in general, and as scholars such as Ian Bogost have pointed out, this market-driven predilection for seemingly purposeless play should not be taken as proof of the inability of videogames to be a medium of serious artistic or ideological expression. His most recent book, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, examines both commercial and non-commercial games (which, in general, have

³ Among the many critics of videogames' derogatory impact on society as a whole, and children in particular, is attorney Jack Thompson, who has made attacks on videogames a personal crusade. Such has been his fervor, and the response to that fervor, that despite repeatedly having his lawsuits dismissed as spurious, and facing discipline from the Florida bar for what many claim is unethical and unprofessional behavior, he has managed to make several guest appearances on networks such as Fox News to make his case against videogames (Game Politics).

more freedom to emphasize ideas that are not easy or pleasant for players to deal with), and makes a compelling case for the power of videogames as a medium capable of expressing serious arguments that can profoundly influence players through the use of *procedural rhetoric* that embodies new persuasive possibilities rooted in videogames' ability to put players in rule-based systems that they can interact in and respond to.

We will discuss the artistic possibilities of non-commercial narrative-driven games more thoroughly in chapter 6, but for now, it is enough to recognize that the medium allows for the expression of ideas as well as the ability to entertain, and that we can find evidence of this fact even in the more mainstream, commercial titles that are the emphasis of our analysis. What is most important to remember is that there is nothing inherent in videogames that render them incapable of being profound artistic experiences for players, and that these experiences are often deeply rooted in narrative. In fact, the narrative roots of videogames go back far and deep, and examining these roots gives us some indications of how familiar the core aspects that seemingly make videogames unique are to narrative media in general.

As we continue to grapple with the seeming differences between videogames and other narrative media, one irrefutable truth should remind us of the necessity of studying these connections—videogames are increasingly becoming a part of our cultural literacy, and increasingly have become a part of our “inner library” through which we filter our readings of all subsequent cultural artifacts.⁴ Their influence on our cultural is undeniable, as they not only embody many of the stories we tell ourselves, but also influence our readings of other stories in other media. This is one reason why recognizing and examining the bloodlines that videogames

⁴ Among the many illuminating ideas presented in Pierre Bayard's book *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*, Bayard writes of the “inner library” we all carry with us, and which adapts to and informs all of our encounters with new books and people (72-73). For a growing percentage of our cultural, this inner library includes videogames.

share with other narrative media is a worthwhile endeavor. Whether one likes it or not, videogames have become just too culturally significant to dismiss as simply meaningless play.

While most commercially released games do aspire first and foremost to be fun to play and to make money, the medium as a whole has shown that it is capable of producing works that are also emotionally moving narrative experiences that can have a great impact on players. Furthermore, if we look closely at these interactive narrative experiences from a historical perspective, we discover that some of them closely resemble their media ancestors, incorporating similar mechanism of control that are vital to influencing player movement within an interactive, play-driven environment.

In the last chapter, I attempted to show how, despite videogames' differences from other media, the core elements that are essential to narrative communication can still operate in videogames in a form that allows for artistic expression for game makers and profound narrative experiences for players. This chapter aims at further examining what videogames have in common with other narrative media. Here, we will trace some of the bloodlines that videogames and other narrative media share. In doing so, I hope to continue to provide evidence of the absurdity of the claim that videogames, because of the essential features of interactivity and play, are incapable of sustaining profound narrative experiences.

As has been emphasized before, the fundamental difference between videogame narratives and narratives in other media is the way in which those who engage in the narratives are allowed to participate in its development. However, while the uniqueness of player activity in videogame narratives is often taken as axiomatic, there are many examples in other narrative media that push boundaries of audience participation in ways similar to what we find in videogame narratives. Examining how other narrative media encourage participation in ways

typically associated with videogames can help us understand videogame narratives in a new, historically rooted context that challenges the perception that videogames are unique and thus superior or inferior to other forms of narrative. This is the primary focus of the section titled “Interactive Antecedents,” which traces interactive narrative roots back to oral storytelling. However, despite what turns out to be a long history of interactive narrative antecedents, there is another key difference between videogame narratives and other types of narratives. Videogames are not only interactive in ways that other types of narrative typically are not, but the form of that interaction is very specific and focused. Videogames, as the name makes clear, are games. Thus, the type of interaction players have with game narratives is playful. But this too is not unique in the history of narrative. In “Playful Precursors” I will briefly illustrate how other narrative media such as the written word emphasize play as fundamental to the transmission of narrative.

Interactive Antecedents

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, critics of videogame narratives come in all shapes and sizes. From neo-luddite literary critics such as Sven Birkerts who lament the death of the author in the digital age, to film critics such as Roger Ebert who lambaste videogames as low-brow and artless, to ludologists such as Markku Eskelinen who want to treat games as entirely separate from narratives, critics of videogame narratives are a diverse group indeed. However, by and large, they do share a common trait—a lack of historical perspective. Long-faced literati, snobby supporters of the silver screen, and lonesome ludologists all pass judgment on what they consider a gimmick or a passing fad—games that promise players participatory narrative experiences. But there is nothing new about participatory or interactive narrative; it is as old as storytelling itself. Reader-response critics like Wolfgang Iser have pointed out that the role of the reader has always been one of interaction with the story, filling in the gaps, making

mental images out of words, drawing conclusions and making meaning that transcend the story. Thus, all written narratives are interactive, since the author and reader both contribute to the creation of the narrative—without the reader, the text would be merely black marks on white pages.⁴ However, interaction has, since the beginning of storytelling, operated in what is perceived by critics of videogame narrative to be a more problematic sense of the term. Our oldest narratives were not mass produced, universally received, unchanging, standard edition written stories, but dynamic oral epics and stories developed and altered in real-time in response to the expectations and desires of listeners/participants.

Giving the notion of interactive narrative the historical perspective it deserves allows us to respond to those critics who say that videogame narratives are shallow, artless gimmicks doomed to fall out of favor. It turns out the desire for audience participation is in our narrative DNA, and the silent submission to an absent author is a relatively new phenomenon, spurred by the proliferation of one-way media such as print, radio, and film. As Jon Samsel and Darryl Wimberly point out in their book *Writing for Interactive Media*:

Only in fairly modern times have audiences been denied the authority to in some way participate in the text. The bedtime story and its antecedents offer a participatory model...it seems likely that in our narrative past we not only tolerated interruptions of our stories, we demanded them. Greek dramas now seen by passive audiences in silent theaters were once religious rites in which audiences, well versed in the narratives performed, did not think of themselves as “spectators” at all, but as participants in their ritually told stories. (Samsel 102)

These two traditions of oral storytelling—the bedtime story and the ancient epic drama—offer different models for interaction. In the first, the child often interrupts the narrative and adds details and demands shifts in emphasis, and in the latter, even when the basic narrative

⁴ In this sense, a book is even more interactive than a movie or videogame, since the reader doing the work of translating the symbols on the page into mental pictures, scenes and characters.

framework is well established, audiences participated in the narrative's unfolding, often changing details in the process. Both models of interaction found in the oral tradition are time-tested and highly successful. It is not surprising, then, that both share traits with contemporary videogame narratives.

In the oral tradition, stories have frequently been told that either a) have clearly defined plot elements but several plot elements that can change or be told in varying orders and/or b) encourage or at least allow participation on the part of the reader/listener as the story unfolds.⁵ In both cases, the narrative experience can be said to allow audience freedom's in ways similar to videogame narratives. And just as we have explored with videogame narratives, these older forms of participatory narratives are successful, because they balance these audience interactions and freedoms with some level of authorial control. If we examine how these older forms handle this task, we begin to see similarities between the craft of oral storytelling and that of videogame narrative production.

As we have seen with even the most open-ended, emergent videogame narratives, within the oral tradition that includes bedtime stories and perhaps the creation of stories as divergent as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *Alice and Wonderland*, where listeners could directly influence the way the narrative progressed in ways still rarely seen in new media, there was a certain level of authorial control involved. Participants might be able to direct the story in various ways, explore certain avenues rather than others, change certain microplot⁵ developments, or even the outcome

⁵ Walter Ong expands on the characteristics of the oral tradition of storytelling in his excellent work, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*.

⁵ In her book *The End of Books—or Books Without End?*, Jane Douglas makes a useful distinction between microplot and macroplot. She describes microplot as the “dilemmas easily described, pursued, and resolved” within the limited time of a single television episode or comic book issue. Conversely, a macroplot extends through many episodes or issues. Interactive narrative computer games, which are more time-consuming than books or films, take a cue from long oral epics and often contain both macroplots and microplots.

of the overall story, but this did not mean then, nor does it mean now, that the author has no control over the story and the messages portrayed in its expression.

As I have previously observed, some degree of authorial control is vital to the transmission of narrative. However, in interactive narratives, it is also essential that participants have a sense that their actions are important to the progression of the story. Whether it be a hypertext fiction, a videogame, an augmented reality or virtual reality experience, a bedtime story, a theme park ride, or a communally told or performed folktale or drama, an interactive narrative must both give us a sense of agency (defined by Janet Murray as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices”) and provide a world in which to immerse ourselves and discover agency (Murray 126). And, to be effective, interactive narrative writers and designers must also, in varying degrees, overcome the limits of various media to express conflict that will engage us and to guide us through the participatory experience toward points of closure. Meeting these criteria is a daunting task for all interactive storytellers and is especially so for videogame writers and designers who have to deal with technical limitations and user expectations while delivering a pleasurable interactive narrative experience. They accomplish this by naturalizing the limitations of the medium and encouraging players to actively engage in the narrative environment that has been established.

Such engagement is vital since a videogame narrative can only exist as such if players engage it as such. This engagement requires some level of freedom and trust be granted to the players by the game creators. While, ultimately, a certain level of authorial control over how a player progresses is necessary, so too is a certain amount of freedom for player digression. Such freedom is what provides participants a feeling of agency essential to the enjoyment of interactive narrative. At the same time, this freedom must be limited not only to ensure the

eventual progress of the player through the beginning, middle, and end of a story, but for practical reasons as well. As Samsel and Wimberly point out, “for every scrap of freedom the reader enjoys in a digital narrative, programmers and designers sweat hours and thousands of lines of code, and producers, more importantly, sweat the number of digits in their outgoings columns (Samsel 164). For this reason, programmers and writers of videogame narratives limit how often and to what extent participants can alter the progression of the macroplot. These limits do have to be naturalized, as we shall see in Chapter 6, but for now we can say that this does not differ from the use of guard-fields in a hypertext, or from techniques used in the oral tradition that guide listeners/participants along an underlying linear narrative, while allowing them the opportunity to digress and explore various avenues along the way, even to the extent that such digression may lead to alternative points of closure deemed suitable by both the storyteller and the participant.

To illustrate this, let us turn to Barbara Hayes-Roth’s essay “Getting into the Story.” Here she describes how parents who improvise stories with their children are engaged in what she calls “directed improvisation” (Hayes-Roth 248). The parent has a narrative structure in mind when she begins her story, and throughout its telling directs the events toward points of closure that will provide certain moral messages, and yet the specifics of the story are influenced by feedback from the child. The same basic narrative can be reworked again and again with different specifics provided by the child, and each time the story gives the child pleasure and reinforces the moral messages the parent wishes to convey. This is the sort of storytelling experience she imagines gave rise to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.

Carroll, Hayes-Roth points out, improvised his stories “around an actively participating child” (Hayes-Roth 247). Just as is the case with videogame narratives, Carroll immersed Alice

Liddell in his narrative by making her one of the main characters in his story. Alice entered this narrative world by following the White Rabbit, a character that functions, according to Hayes-Roth, as a channel for “Alice’s autonomous improvisations along Carroll’s intended plotline” (247). The White Rabbit is the controlling mechanism used by Carroll to keep Alice moving within Wonderland. The White Rabbit is necessary because Carroll, like all good interactive storytellers, allows for, and indeed encourages, digressions in his work. This is evident in the final print version of his tale, where Alice makes several digressions that take her away from the main plot.

Hayes-Roth imagines that Alice’s desire to explore certain alternative adventures within Wonderland contributed to the types of digressions her character takes in the story. She also sees the character of the Cheshire Cat as being in the story to encourage Alice’s digressions. The number of times Alice chooses to follow the Cheshire Cat, despite warnings that she should not, indicates to Hayes-Roth Alice’s propensity for diversion. However, despite her many forays along alternative paths, Alice, of course, is always led back to the main plot.

Carroll’s handling of digression is particularly relevant to creators and players of videogame narratives, for, as Bob Hughes points out in “Storyspace: From the Path to the Landscape Itself,” “digressions are the whole point of hypermedia” (Hughes 212). When critics of videogames come across evidence of players diverting from the progression of the story in a game, they see this as a weakness of the medium from a narrative perspective, however, as the above example illustrates, such digressions from plot progression are not unique to videogames, nor do they necessarily constitute a shortcoming of the medium. If we look for them, we can see these Cheshire Cat elements in videogame narratives, encouraging players to occasionally stop and smell the digital roses that took game designers so long to create. We can also find White

Rabbit elements that encourage players to eventually seek to progress through the story. To get a better feel for how these two time-tested tools of interactive narrative manifest themselves in videogame narratives, we will now examine these elements in the critically acclaimed adventure game, *The Last Express* (1997).

Digression and Progression in The Last Express

The setting of *The Last Express* is the Orient Express in 1914—immediately before the outbreak of World War I. The player assumes the role of Robert Cath, an American fugitive with a mysterious past who boards the train late, and in dramatic fashion, by jumping from a motorcycle being driven by a beautiful young woman as it runs parallel to the train. Cath comes to the train to visit Tyler Whitney, a friend who has summoned him for reasons unknown, only to quickly discover that Tyler has been killed. The player, as Cath, assumes Tyler's identity, and attempts to find his murderer. But this is not a simple murder mystery. As game play continues, what unfolds is a multi-layered story of international intrigue, love and myth. All the major nationalities involved in World War I are on the train and the complex relationships between them give us some sense of why the war happened.

What I just described is not merely the back-story of the game, but the synchronic narrative progression that the player uncovers both through interactive game play and the resulting cut-scenes. While practically ancient by videogame standards, *The Last Express* still holds up remarkably well as a videogame, because it offers an immersive and engaging first-rate narrative experience complete with complex characters, intricate plot developments, suspense, and a poignant resolution of conflict. One of the ways Jordan Mechner, the director/co-writer, and his team pulled off this feat is through skillful writing and design that incorporates the White Rabbit and Cheshire Cat elements Hayes-Roth identifies as emblematic of the control

mechanisms typical to oral storytelling. To appreciate how this is done in *The Last Express*, let us examine how players interact with the narrative world of the game.

The players interact with the game by controlling the protagonist, and move through the navigable game space, piecing together the narrative as they do. Unlike in what most perceive to be a “traditional narrative,” the participants play an active role in the narrative progression by moving through the game space along one of the restricted trajectories set up by the game designers. The participants, like the child who influences the story her parent tells her, must be given the sense that they are actively participating in the unfolding of the narrative and given the sense that their actions and conversations are important to the progression, or digression, of the plotline. In many ways, *The Last Express* is a typical adventure game (a genre that we will examine more closely in Chapter 5), and in adventure games, the primary way players are made to feel that their in game actions matter to the progression of the plot is through puzzles that the players must solve for the game to continue.

The puzzles in *The Last Express* are effective in preserving the suspension of disbelief necessary for player immersion because they are all appropriate to the progression of the game-narrative. Some perfectly enjoyable and successful adventure games are poor examples of good videogame narratives, because they do not put the effort into relating all of the puzzles in the game to the narrative that drives the game forward. In *The Last Express*, however, puzzles are always related to the flow of the narrative. For example, players must find out how to get into other passengers’ cabins, how to find clues important to uncovering the truth about Tyler’s murder, how to find and defuse a bomb on the train, or how and when to engage a terrorist that has taken over the train (Figure 4-1). During the course of players’ exploration of the game space, they may be distracted from their immediate goals by diversions such as overhearing other

passengers' conversations and acting on what they hear even though such actions don't seem to be related to finding Tyler's murderer, or picking up a conductor's sketch pad and flipping through the sketches, or simply walking about the train, admiring the scenery. These Cheshire Cat elements of the game give the player a sense of freedom within the game space and provide a richness to the environment that makes the game more immersive. If and when players decide they want to do something to push the main plot forward, they need only to follow the White Rabbits that pop up as clues that tip off participants to what they should be doing next. For instance, control might be momentarily taken from the player so that the camera will focus on a particular object to emphasize its importance, or something the player as Cath overhears might overtly direct him to his next goal.

Once players decide to follow a White Rabbit, they often are presented with tasks that require effort and at which they might fail. Such effort ensures that players are actively engaged in the progress of the story and feel a sense of accomplishment when they succeed at overcoming an obstacle. Such obstacles, ideally, are daunting enough to provide a sense of accomplishment for players, but still surmountable. To further ensure that players can and will progress through the story, multiple opportunities are often given to complete a task essential to the progression of the plot. It is as if the White Rabbit is waiting patiently for the player to succeed so that the player can continue to follow it.⁶

The various trajectories players can follow through the game space and through the narrative give the players a real sense that they are deciding how the narrative unfolds. However, the paths that the player may follow through the game are not unlimited, of course. Certain

⁶ This metaphor becomes literal in American McGee's *Alice*, when a nightmare version of the White Rabbit often guides the player forward and often stops and waits for players to overcome adversaries, successfully make dangerous jumps, or solve a puzzle. One might ask why I did not use *Alice* as my primary example for this section, but the connection is so literal with that game, that I feared the metaphor would be dismissed as too narrow to be applied to videogame narratives in general.

restrictions must be put into place to ensure the progression of the narrative. A great deal of consideration must go into how players will interface with the game, and in what order they can access elements in the database or else the experience will not be a narrative, and the player seeking a narrative experience would become frustrated by unfulfilled expectations. As Lev Manovich says in his book *The Language of New Media*, “but merely to create these trajectories is of course not sufficient; the author also has to control the semantics of the elements and the logic of their connection so that the resulting object will meet the criteria of narrative” (Manovich 228).

This is a daunting task for game designers and writers, but as we have seen, it is not without precedent. Oral storytellers like Lewis Carroll had to balance digression and exploration with plot progression. Carroll allowed Alice to digress without penalty within the world of Wonderland by following the Cheshire Cat, but when her interaction with this character took her too far astray, Carroll would reintroduce the White Rabbit to remind her that she had someplace to go. Likewise, in *The Last Express*, the player is allowed to digress and explore in the game-world but is brought back to the main story by the forward motion of the train and the moving hands of the clock. The player is forced to return to the needs of the adventure through these conceits of the unalterable progression of space and time.

The game occurs in real time but at a leisurely pace: players cannot stray too far or they will miss key opportunities to progress the plot, but time is allotted for participants to explore the train and the many well-developed characters on it. Much as the Cheshire Cat tempted Alice, so too do the characters in *The Last Express* tempt participants to sidetrack themselves from the main plot and explore the many subplots and intrigues available in this rich narrative environment. The same characters also often act as White Rabbits. If the player is lost or

sidetracked, speaking with characters and overhearing conversations will provide clues about how to get back on track.

Playful Precursors

As we have just established, participatory or interactive narrative is as old as storytelling itself. While its popularity briefly waned during a period of dominance of one-way media such as print, radio, and film, the interactivity that computers allow has brought participatory narrative back as a commercially viable mass market product in the form of videogames, and as we shall see in Chapter 6, has shaped our expectations of narrative in all media. For now, let us just remind ourselves that given the evidence to which we have already alluded, it is clear that participation can be and has been a common feature of narrative. While this evidence undercuts one of the major criticisms of videogame narrative, there remains the more specific compatibility issue of combining narratives with games. To show that this too is a criticism lacking historical perspective, we could once again return to the work of Lewis Carroll, as he structured many of his works around games, and both plays with his readers and encourages his readers to play with his texts as if they were literary games. However, such a move might suggest that only a small percentage of literary texts are playful, when in fact, I will argue that many of them encourage not only play, but the rule-based play inherent in games.⁷

The sort of games that writers and readers play depends on the type of literature the writers produce and the expectations that readers bring to the texts. In the next chapter, we will examine how popular genre fiction may be understood as a type of game that writers and players play, and look at how these sorts of games influence the development of the majority of

⁷ This work seeks only to indicate cursory connections between the sorts of play found in print literature and the sorts of play found in videogame narratives. For a more thorough exploration of the playful aspects of literature, an excellent resource is Warren Motte's *From Playtexts: Ludics in Contemporary Literature*. In it, Motte states "my first axiom is that play is an essential, non-negligible dimension of literature" (27). The same axiom informs this discussion, and forms a key link between videogame narratives and print literature.

videogame narratives. In this section, however, we will focus on the types of games we engage in while reading literature in the most uncontested sense of the word. We will focus on the type of literary game initiated by a writer that is accessible enough to garner the sometimes derogatory description of “popular,” but who is regarded highly enough for his craft and creativity to still maintain ivory-tower credibility.

Umberto Eco is a well-regarded postmodern author and theorist who has articulated a sentiment that many noted authors (especially postmodern authors) have expressed—that the acts of creating and reading narratives is often playful.⁸ In his “Postscript” to his novel *The Name of the Rose*, a postmodern detective story set in a medieval abbey, he puts forth many ideas about his understanding of the writing process, and the various relationships that exists between writers, their texts, and readers. Much of what he says about the way he writes and what he expects from his readers is applicable to videogame narratives.

Eco’s explanation of the roles of writers and readers is very similar to the roles often played by game designers and game players. It is clear in his “Postscript” that he sees his text as a game, and he sees his ideal readers as people who are willing to play his game with him. He says of his ideal reader: “What model reader did I want as I was writing? An accomplice, to be sure, one who would play my game (524). That a videogame narrative is not just a game that players play by themselves or with other gamers, but also a game that players play with the game makers is an obvious, if underdeveloped idea. As has been established before, videogame makers put a great deal of effort into creating a world governed by rules in which players can

⁸ Because the postmodern movement purposefully plays with the concept of definitions, it is of little surprise that so many have attempted to define postmodern literature without much success at achieving a clear consensus. Attempting to define this term is outside the bounds of this work; however, one of the key characteristics often identified with postmodernism is its playful and often ironic reworking and rethinking of modernist conventions. Since Eco himself is one of the postmodern theorists who has put forth this characteristic, it should come as no surprise that Eco’s work certainly does fit this description of postmodern literature, as it often self-reflexively plays with popular genre conventions, and thus audience expectations.

explore and progress. To a large extent, the success of players is based on their ability to figure out how the game world created by the game designers works, and how to progress through the game space, overcoming obstacles within the rules dictated by the game. Likewise, for Eco, his readers are playing a game of his devising, and must figure out how to navigate his text if they are to succeed in making it through the work, and figuring out some of its meanings.

For Eco, his novels are games in which he and the player are not equal, as they would be if they were engaging in a game with a pre-established set of rules (which, as we shall see, is an apt description of popular genre fiction). The sort of game Eco wants to play is one that he creates and which the readers must figure out how to play as they go along. He wishes to create a reading experience that is not simply an enactment of well-worn conventions and formulas, but instead plays with these conventions, creates new ways of reading, and challenges readers to learn and adapt to the text in ways they may not be used to. He distinguishes between experimental fiction such as the sort he is trying to create, and fiction that strictly follows pre-established rote formulas: “If there is a difference, it lies between the text that seeks to produce a new reader and the text that tries to fulfill the wishes of the readers already to be found on the street” (523). The first kind of writing is simply telling the same story that has been told before, the one that the public was already asking for. The second type tries to create a new audience and seeks “to reveal [to it] what it should want, even if it does not know it” (523). I will argue in the next chapter that the division between experimental literature and popular, formulaic literature is often not as clear cut as this, and that there is artistic merit, sometimes, in following (for the most part) literary conventions and fulfilling audience expectations rather than emphasizing innovation. However, for now, Eco’s emphasis on pushing boundaries, and

pushing readers in the process, fits our purpose of establishing that literature in its most admired forms can also be understood as a game between writers and readers.⁹

The game that Eco proposes, just like any game, requires a game space, a world within the magic circle of play in which readers can explore. In describing the creation of his novel, Eco emphasizes world creation over linguistic technique: “to tell a story, you must first of all construct a world, furnished as much as possible, down to the slightest details” (512). This emphasis parallels that of game designers who must construct the world of a game before doing anything else. Like a game designer, Eco spent a significant amount of his time constructing his world: “the first year of work on my novel,” says Eco, “was devoted to the construction of the world” (513). Such effort is necessary if one takes seriously the notion, as Eco does, that a literary work is a space that readers move through. Eco emphasizes this point in two main ways in *The Name of the Rose*. First, by choosing to make his novel ostensibly a detective story (although one “in which very little is discovered, and the detective is defeated”), he not only creates a set of audience expectations that he can playfully undermine, but he also lets his readers know that his novel is meant to be a space of conjecture (525).

Detective stories invite readers to jump ahead, to try to figure out who is guilty, and what motivated the crimes. Eco says that he wanted to write his novel as a detective novel because he wanted to emphasize that readers should try to figure out the logic of his world. He says of this choice: “the crime novel represents a kind of conjecture...you have to conjecture that all the

⁹ It should be noted here, even though this is a concept we will return to again in Chapter 5 and in Chapter 6, that the esteem with which literary and film critics hold literary texts and films that break free from formulas and genre conventions is arguably even more fanatical among videogame critics and reviewers. In fact, it is very rare for a game to score exceptionally well if it does not in some way push the boundaries of its genre, or better yet, shattered perceptions about what is possible in its genre. One of the most frequent criticisms levied by game reviews is “you’ve played this before,” and one of the most powerful words of praise used in game criticism is that a game is “innovative.” To an extent, this can be explained by the amount of time players play games, and the amount of money they spend on them. After spending \$50-60 on a single game, and playing that game for 100 hours or more, many gamers do long for something new.

events have a logic, the logic that the guilty party has imposed on them (525). This process of conjecture involves readers trying to anticipate the movement of the story, urges them to jump ahead to try to anticipate “who-dun-it,” and asks them to think back to earlier parts of the text to look for clues to piece together the solution to the puzzle before it is revealed to them. The objective of this game for writers is to try to encourage this behavior with clues and false avenues toward potential solution, but keep readers interested by suggesting new possibilities, and making them continue to wonder what the ultimate conclusion will be. Just as participatory narrative is a balancing act between digression and progression, so is the detective story is a balancing act between encouraging temporal and spatial leaps through the text, and conjecture about possible outcomes, and making sure that readers eventually come back to the now of their readings, and continue on to the ultimate conclusion on the text. Eco sees this balancing act as a game that he and his readers play, and while he wants to maintain control of this game, he also says that he “wanted the reader to enjoy himself, at least as much as I was enjoying myself...the reader was to be diverted, but not di-verted, distracted from problems.” (526).

The second way that Eco reinforces his emphasis on reader movement through the space of the text is by putting at the heart of the story a Mannerist Maze, a labyrinth in a library that the detective protagonist, William, must move through to discover the truth about the murders at the abbey, and what motivated them. Of course, his readers move with William through this labyrinth, but this is merely a *mise-en-abyme* for the work as a whole, which Eco puts forth is also a labyrinth. As already established, Eco wanted to create a space of conjecture, and according to him, “an abstract model of conjecturality is a labyrinth” (525). Eco identifies three types of labyrinths of progressing complexity: the Classical Greek maze with no dead ends that is like a string when unwound, the Mannerist Maze, which when unraveled is more like a tree,

with roots, and many branching paths, and which represents a model of trial and error, and finally, the most complicated maze of all, what Deleuze and Guattari call a “rhizome” space. Eco says of the rhizome: “the rhizome is so constructed that every path can be connected with every other one. It has no center, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite. The space of conjecture is a rhizome space.” (525-26). He says that “the labyrinth of the library in the novel is mannerist, but the world of the novel is a rhizome space” (526). It is a story, ostensibly structured as a detective novel; however, this basic story “ramifies into so many other stories, all stories of other conjectures, all linked with the structure of conjecture as such” (525). So, for Eco, *The Name of the Rose* represents an attempt at creating a rhizome space—a space of infinite possibility and play for readers to explore through their readings of his work.

In this sense, Eco is echoing the work of many other playful writers such as Julio Cortázar who, with his text *Hopscotch*, suggests to readers many different reading paths, all of which bring forth different meanings. Many other examples of playful literature exist, and some of those are examined in Warren Motte’s study of ludics in literature *From Playtexts: Ludics in Contemporary Literature*. As Motte illustrates, many authors take an equally playful approach to writing, but propose a completely different game space, with completely different rules, and completely different roles for authors and readers for the playing of these games. One of the primary reasons why I chose Eco as an example of ludics in literature is that, like many critics of videogame narratives, authorial control is essential to Eco, and highlighted in the rules he sets up for his game in *The Name of the Rose*. As Motte says of Eco, “For Eco, the writer elaborates and controls the game...while the reader is encouraged to play the text, the writer in effect plays the reader” (184).

What we shall see when we examine the sorts of games writers and readers play in popular genre fiction is that in such works, the playing field is more level, and writers must adapt to readers as much as readers must adapt to writers, as the game is as much determined by the pre-established conventions of the genre as they are by the specific game designers of a particular game. Eco wants to give the illusion of a familiar world to his readers by calling it a detective novel, but what he really wants to do is create a new space for his readers. He does this by undermining the expectations of his readers by flouting many of the conventions of detective fiction. This is rare in videogames, but not unheard of, and in a moment we will get to an example of a videogame that parallels the sort of game that Eco is trying to play with his readers. However, one final point about why it is rare is important to our examination of the connection between playful literature and videogame narratives.

Videogames are in some ways closer to novels than much of television and film. All of these media are highly focused on world creation, but in novels, as in videogames, significant effort is required to enter this imaginary space. As Umberto Eco tells us in his “Postscript” to *The Name of the Rose*, a novel is first and foremost a world, and entering this world requires effort. Much to the chagrin of his editors, Eco purposely made the first hundred pages of his novel difficult and demanding, because he insisted that if a reader wants to enter the world of his novel, the reader will have to accept its pace. The novel thus teaches the reader the ideal rhythm of reading it requires. Eco compares entering a novel to climbing a mountain, saying that readers must “learn the rhythm of respiration, acquire the pace; otherwise you stop right away” (520). In short, there is a learning curve involved, and if readers do not get past it, they will never gain entry into the novel. Similarly, if players do not learn the patterns of a videogame, they will never fall into the flow of the game; they will never be fully in its world. If this happens on a

large scale, many players are likely to become frustrated with playing and give up. They may sell the game quickly, hurting new game sales by putting used copies on the market, and they may tell their friends that the game is too difficult to get into and not worth the effort. For this reason, most games are very careful to balance that which is new and innovative in the game with established conventions of play and story.

However, there are games, like Eco's novel, that seem to be giving players what they want, when in fact, what they are really doing is trying to shape players into wanting what they give them. While it is a dangerous game for game designers to play from a financial standpoint, when it works, the results are videogame narratives that prove that the medium is capable of not only entertaining players, but shaping them as Eco attempts to do with his work. As we shall see, this is not the only model of play in literature that parallels the sorts of play we can find between videogame designers and players, nor is it even the dominate model. However, the way that Eco insists on creating a new world for his readers, and requires them to adapt to this world slowly so that it isn't until they are deep within the logic of the text that they figure out that they are not in a simple, linear narrative, but a rhizome space rife with conjectural possibilities, is an excellent model with which to compare some of the most innovative and profound videogame narratives. One of those games, and the one that we will examine now, is the critically acclaimed and hauntingly beautiful game for the Playstation 2, *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005).¹⁰

¹⁰ It is not by accident that Sony called the CPU in the Playstation 2 the Emotion Engine. As a game console maker and as a game publisher, Sony has always had artistic and narrative aspirations for videogames. This philosophy toward videogames is what allowed *Shadow of the Colossus* to be made. Lead designer Fumito Ueda gained tremendous critical acclaim, but no commercial success with his earlier game *Ico* (2001). Despite the economic failure of *Ico*, Sony executives believed in the artistic merit of *Ico*, green lighting Ueda to try his hand again as something new and challenging to players, and he delivered with what he calls the spiritual successor and prequel to *Ico*. Despite it being just as new to players as *Ico* was, this time Sony Computer Entertainment put forth significant advertising money to push the game. The result is that *Shadow of the Colossus* became not only a critical success, but also a popular title, achieving "Greatest Hits" status in August of 2006 for Sony, meaning that it had sold at least 250,000 copies in the U.S in less than a year.

Creating a New Player in *Shadow of the Colossus*

Right from the start of the game, players realize that *Shadow of the Colossus* is not a typical action-adventure game. When it was first released, television commercials for the game gave the indication that it would be an action-packed sequence of battles with fantastically enormous creatures. The game does eventually deliver on this promise. However, the game opens with a long, slow moving, cinematic sequence (about 15 minutes long) in which not a word is spoken for the first seven minutes, and significant portions of the game that follows involves long, solitary wandering. During this time, players are impressed by the beauty of the landscape and of the musical score, and given a sense of scale for the land that they have entered and continue to travel through.

The first exposure to this landscape comes in that opening cinematic, where we discover that the land is accessible only by an extremely long bridge, which a seemingly lone figure slowly crosses on his horse. This bridge leads to a temple into which this figure goes, down a long spiral staircase to a shrine. There, the character dismounts his horse, and removes what appeared to be just a blanket. In removing the blanket, a limp body of a woman is revealed, whom the main character places on an altar. Here, finally, a narration begins, in a language created just for the game (it is subtitled in English), which Ueda describes as sounding like a Romanization of Japanese (Bettenhausen 1). The narration is by a wooden totem that materializes from a mist, which we later discover is Lord Emon. He introduces us to an origin myth of light and dark, and speaks of an ancient being who can resurrect the dead, but resides in a Forbidden Land. This nameless character (whose ironic name, Wander, we only find in the credits) has come to the Forbidden Land to find this being and have it resurrect the woman he brought (again, named only in the credits as Mono). After the player is told this, Lord Emon

fades and the camera pans out to reveal shadow creatures rise from stone floor to attack Wander. Wander quickly vanquishes them all by simply holding up a magic sword of light. This feat prompts the disembodied voice of Dormin to speak, commenting on the sword's power. Wander asks the voice from the sky if he is in fact the Dormin of legend who can control souls and resurrect his slain companion. Dormin tells him that he can resurrect the woman, but Wander must first travel the Forbidden Land seeking out the Colossi, which we later discover contain parts of Dormin's spirit, and destroy them. Only the sword of light can find and defeat these creatures. Its light guides the player to the mammoth creature like a beacon when it is held up to the sun, and it is the only weapon that can defeat the Colossi. Wander is warned that if he completes this task, he will pay a heavy price, but he does not care, and neither does the players that know that the game requires them to defeat the Colossi.

What the players do not yet realize, however, is how lonely the journey will be. The game is missing much of what most gamers have come to expect from an action-adventure game. It has no towns, cities, or dungeons for players to explore, or non-player characters for the players to interact with as the game progresses, and no hordes of minor enemies to defeat as the player moves from climatic boss battle to climatic boss battle. It cuts out all of that, leaving just the player's avatar, Wander, his trusty horse, Argo, and the 16 Colossi that he must battle in the game. The entire experience is stripped of most of the conceits typical to the genre, leaving only the barest of narrative skeletons, and beyond the opening cinematic, virtually no dialogue to progress the story (Figure 4-2). The story doesn't need dialogue to progress, though. Almost all of the emotion of the narrative, all of its meaning, is expressed in the wordless interactions the player has with the game world (a feat critics such as Steven Poole claim is not possible). Players know what they must do—they must defeat the Colossi to save Mono. What these acts

mean slowly reveal themselves, victory after victory, hour after hour, until players realize that they are being affected by their actions in surprising ways.

Players are compelled forward on this unusual journey by their desire to solve the narrative and game play puzzles they are presented. Although players know little about Mono, or why Wander wants to save her so desperately, players are motivated to find out more about the story by the passion they see in Wander that continues to drive him and them deeper into the game. They want to know more about Mono, and why she is important to Wander, and what will happen when all of the Colossi are defeated. They are also driven by the challenge of defeating the Colossi. Each represents a puzzle that must be figured out. Each has unique weaknesses that must be exploited for the player to be able to defeat them, and these weaknesses become increasingly difficult to find and exploit as the game progresses.

Just when players believe they have the Colossi figured out, just when they believe they have discovered a pattern, the game surprises them, and insists that they take nothing for granted. For instance, the first couple of Colossi have their weak point on their heads; however, this changes as the game goes on. Players may begin to think that each Colossi will be larger than the last, but just as they do, they are faced with a smaller, more nimble adversary. Players quickly learn that they must use their environment to defeat the Colossi, but then they are faced with an environment that works against them and is not an aide at all in their efforts. In short, the game keeps players guessing, on their toes, and the one constant lesson players learn is that they must continue to adapt, because there is no easily derived pattern to follow, and when they think they have figured out the game, they realize they haven't figured it out at all.

The ever-changing patterns of *Shadow of the Colossus* is unusual for a videogame. The pleasure of playing many videogames is to a large extent derived from players figuring out its

patterns, its rhythms, its rules, and becoming better at the game because of this knowledge. One can play *Ms. Pac-Man*, for instance, without realizing that each of the ghosts has its own personality—its own pattern of movement of pursuit and retreat—but playing it well requires such a realization. If a player does not learn these patterns, the player will not be able to continue deep into the game. However, once they learn this pattern, they are able to apply it throughout the game. Here, however, players cannot get comfortable, they cannot get lost into a flow, and while the challenge represented by each Colossi is exhilarating, the overall affect of not being able to derive an overall pattern that will ensure success creates an underlining feeling of unease. Instead, of falling into a rote pattern, like a machine, players are continually asked to think about what they are doing. Eventually, players begin to see the Colossi, and themselves, differently, and begin to wonder if they are the hero of this story, or the villain.

Another aspect of the game that makes players think about what they are doing is the increased amount of time they must spend looking for the Colossi, as they become increasingly difficult to find. While the light from the magic sword guides players, they soon discover that the light can be imprecise, bent from mountains, and lead them down false paths. Each journey from the center of the game space, the altar to which Wander and players return after each battle, becomes increasingly complicated, requiring players to frequently turn, back track, find hidden paths, and traverse difficult terrain. What begins as simple rides on Argo, become difficult and long journeys during which Argo must sometimes be left behind, leaving only Wander, completely alone to find the Colossi, and face them. In short, what begins as a Classic Greek maze in reverse, with the player beginning in the center and following a path that obviously and easily leads to the first Colossus, transitions to increasingly complicated Mannerist Mazes, rife with false trails and dead ends. They eventually can only lead to the one right destination—the

next puzzle that the player must figure out, the next Colossus that the player must figure out how to defeat—but the journey becomes frequently frustrating, and the player is left feeling as though he is lost in a labyrinth. I had to resort several times as the game progressed to a game guide to aid me in traversing the increasingly labyrinthine paths in the seemingly open landscape of the game and to figure out how to defeat the increasingly difficult adversaries that I had to face when ultimately reaching my destination. And after each victory, Wander is returned to the center, to the altar to start again so that from the seemingly expansive, open landscape, players begin to recognize an ever more extensive labyrinth stretching from all sides from the temple to which he returns again and again, like Sisyphus rolling his rock.

Players are placed in a space in which they must continually try to figure out what they are doing and why, a game space that becomes increasingly difficult to traverse, where each Colossi becomes more difficult to find and defeat, and they are left wondering, with ever-increasing anxiety, where their efforts will lead them. The first indication that something is not normal about Wander's victories is that after each victory, the essence of the Colossi enters Wander, pierces him like a sword, knocking him out. He wakes up back at the temple each time, his grip and stamina increased making him stronger for his next fight, but the player begins to notice that his appearance changes—he becomes paler, more haggard, and more ominous. What is at one level an exhilarating feeling of accomplishment for defeating such a massive and difficult adversary increasingly becomes tempered by a feeling of guilt that is noted by many players on message boards. In his essay "Story Mechanics as Game Mechanics in *Shadow of the Colossus*" Ben Sherman discusses this guilt:

The reason this occurs is as simple as having the player do something that is morally reprehensible. The knee-jerk reaction would be to bring up *Grand Theft Auto*. This is a game where, out of the box, the player could murder a score of prostitutes. This doesn't cause nearly as much cognitive dissonance as taking

down the fifth, bird-like colossus. This colossus does not immediately attack you. You must get its attention by shooting it and only then does it fly down to get rid of you...In the story line, this is where the player learns that not all colossi will attack. Sometimes the player must instigate the battle. In *Grand Theft Auto*, there is no emotional set up for the homicide. It appears as simply a mechanic. In *Shadow of the Colossus*, it unfolds as a story would, but the hand of the protagonist is synonymous with the hand of the player, so the protagonist's guilt becomes the player's guilt.

This guilt, which may be still ambivalent at this point for many players—after all, the players are just doing what is expected of them to progress in the story—becomes far more tangible when, late in the game, Wander, and by extension the player, seemingly cause the death of their only companion in the game, Argo. In the lonely landscape of the game, most players become surprisingly attached to Argo, a beautifully rendered, life-like horse without whom the player could not have advanced in the game. The long, lonely paths through the game would be unbearably long without Argo, and many of the battles with the Colossi would be impossible without him. So at a late point in the game, after the players have spent many hours with Argo and have become used to him not only as a game-play mechanic, but as a companion through a beautiful, but desolate world, when Argo seems hesitant to cross a bridge, the player thinks nothing of it, knowing that to continue in the game, the bridge must be crossed. But when the bridge begins to collapse, and it seems as though both rider and horse will fall to their death, and Argo, sensing this flings Wander forward to safety while falling to what seems to be his own death, the player feels a significant sense of loss. For some, this is a moment in the game when they realize, for the first time, that what they thought was a game in which they were playing a hero, Wander, seeking to save the soul of his fallen love, Mono, turns out to be a game driven by Wander's and the players' obsession to continue no matter what.

First, the player is asked to kill Colossi, big brooding things made of rock and dirt and fur that hardly seem like living creatures. Gradually, these creatures become more complicated,

appear more beautiful, and some act less aggressive, not attacking or even running from a fight. But still the player is required to kill them, and the player continues on, as obsessed as Wander is to finish what has been started, and to save Mono. Then, the player is made to force his only companion, Argo, onto a bridge which collapses, and Argo saves Wander even though Wander is the one who brought Argo to his fate. The emotional experience of the game totally changes, and many players realize that as they are playing the game, they are being played by it.

If *The Name of the Rose* is a detective novel “in which very little is discovered, and the detective is defeated,” *Shadow of the Colossus* is an action-adventure game with more traveling than action, and one in which the player turns out to be as much of a villain as a hero. Both Eco and Ueda wanted to play with their audience’s expectations, and put forth a space of conjecture, an infinite space of possibility, a rhizome space. Eco says of his novel that “the labyrinth of the library in the novel is mannerist, but the world of the novel is a rhizome space” (526). Likewise, in an interview about his game, Ueda says about his mysterious ending, which involves the revival of Mono, but the dual death of Wander and Dormin at the hands of Lord Emon, and their seeming rebirth in the form of a baby boy on the alter where Mono was revived: “The essential goal of the ending was to leave it slightly vague, but also to imply a never-ending story that will be left up to the individual gamer’s imagination. Yes, that was quite deliberate [in order] to keep the gamer guessing.”

At the end of the game, players are indeed kept guessing, as evidenced by the hundreds of fan sites and game forums that speculate about the meaning of the events in the game, and discuss what impact playing the game had on them. What begins as a seemingly simple quest, typical of action-adventure games—destroy the enemy to save the girl—ends up as a complicated story of obsession and unintended consequences. What begins as an open world

turns into a labyrinth of increasing complexity, until, one could argue, the space of the game, like the space of Eco's novel, has become a rhizome space, in which players are left to continually conjecture about the nature of the game and their actions in it.

These structural connections between *The Name of the Rose* and *Shadow of the Colossus* are meant only to suggest that the sort of games authors sometimes play with their readers are very much like the sorts of games game designers sometimes play with their players. As I have emphasized before, at the heart of these relationships is the issue of control—how does an author or game designer control their audiences' experiences, and how much control do they want to give to their audiences? Both Eco and Ueda want to make their audiences think that they know how the stories they are in will unfold, but undermine those expectations to create a new space of conjecture for their audience to be in. But as we shall see in our next chapter, flouting audience expectations is not the only way to emotionally impact them, and profound narrative experiences can emerge from videogames that by and large follow established formulas. In fact, in some ways, players can immerse themselves emotionally more readily in game narratives that align game play conventions with narrative conventions.



Figure 4-1. *The Last Express*: Cath is in a knife fight (1997).



Figure 4-2. Wander with his only companion, his horse Argo in *The Shadow of Colossus* (2005).

CHAPTER 5 GENRE AND FORMULA IN VIDEOGAME NARRATIVES

Convention and Invention in Videogame Narratives

It should be clear by now that while much has been made of the seemingly problematic integration of stories and games, the assertion that they are incompatible elements within videogames has been much ado about nothing. There are difficulties in creating successful participatory narratives, but doing so is possible and fulfills the desires of an audience who want, in addition to the narrative experiences we find in books, comics, television and movies, the more participatory, playful experiences found in videogame narratives. As we have come to understand, one of the primary ways in which videogame narrative designers overcome some of the inherent tensions that can exist between creating the most pleasurable game possible and creating the most pleasurable story possible is to overlay, as best they can, narrative and game structures.

In Chapter 4, we examined some of the ways that narrative and game structures can be harmonized. We looked at how videogames borrow techniques from the oral traditions of storytelling to maintain authorial control while giving players degrees of control as well, and we looked at how a videogame can provide a narrative and play experience that is unexpected and profoundly moving in ways similar to what we find with inventive, postmodern fiction. In doing so, I hope I have countered some of the criticism that videogames have received regarding the limitations of the medium's narrative potentials. However, now that it has been established that inventive, player-changing interactive narrative experiences are possible in the medium of the videogame, I will now attempt to show that videogame narratives are also capable of being both largely generic and formulaic, and still be equally pleasurable and meaningful. In fact, as we shall see, combining the structures of generic game-play with those of literary formulas is an

effective way to harmonize the sometimes competing demands of telling a compelling story and creating an enjoyable game.

To critics of videogame narratives, it may seem like an “I told you so moment” to have conceded that videogame narratives are typically highly generic, formulaic, and governed by well-established game-play and literary conventions. In fact, to most people, these terms—generic, formulaic, conventional—are wholly derogatory and used only as insults for the worst kind of popular culture trash entertainment. However, not everyone subscribes to this notion. In fact, one popular culture scholar, John G. Cawelti, has gone so far as to attribute significant value to popular genre and formula conventions.

Cawelti proposes that all works of art, and indeed, all cultural products, “contain a mixture of two kinds of elements: conventions and inventions” (Cawelti: *Concept* 732). Inventions are elements of a work that break new ground, such as new types of characters and ideas. In Chapter 4, we saw that Eco wanted to create a new kind of literature for a new kind of reader with his novel *The Name of the Rose*. However, in doing so, he had to rely on well-defined literary-generic conventions. Cawelti defines conventions as those elements of a work that creators and their audience know beforehand—elements such as beloved plots, stereotyped characters, and culturally accepted ideas (732). Readers of *The Name of the Rose* understand that the novel is inventive only because they share with Eco an understanding of the conventions he is playing with. His novel is proposed as a murder mystery, with recognizable conventions of the genre such as a confined setting, a classic, rational but eccentric detective, and a cast of the usual suspects and motives. That the novel is discovered to be much more complicated and surprising to readers shifts it away from emphasizing convention toward emphasizing invention;

however, again, this inventiveness and newness is built on a foundation of well-worn, universally understood literary elements common to the detective story genre.

If we examine the history of narrative in all cultures, Cawelti suggests, we discover that until recently, balancing convention and invention was typical and expected. However, the rapid cultural changes that characterize the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have led the intellectual elite who thrive on knowing new things that help them understand an ever-changing world in new ways to preference invention over convention. In literature, this manifested in the admiration of radically inventive works such as James Joyce's novel *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* (1953), and T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (1922). Today, such radically inventive and challenging works, which respond to the increasingly rapid cultural changes that precipitate their production, are held up as the epitomes of literary accomplishment. Yet even in these ever-changing times (and perhaps even more so because of them), most literature enjoyed by most readers today is still highly conventional and formulaic (733).

Cawelti suggests that there is a reason for the continued enjoyment of conventions in literature and in life. He states that both conventions and inventions serve different, but equally crucial cultural functions:

Conventions represent familiar shared images and meanings and they assert an ongoing continuity of values; inventions confront us with a new perception or meaning which we have not realized before...Conventions help maintain a culture's stability while inventions help it respond to changing circumstances and provide new information about the world. (732)

Thus, while inventions are what drive the rapid cultural and technical development that has taken place throughout human history, conventions keep societies (and readers) grounded, connected and comforted in the face of these changes. Therefore, a balance between invention and

convention is vital to the well-being of a society, and the success of a literary work; invention and convention fulfill basic aspects of humans' need for novel forms of order.

On the one hand, people crave newness, challenges, and change; people crave danger, excitement, and unpredictability. On the other hand, people also crave stability, reliability, comfort, safety and security. Trying to balance these opposed traits is one of the oldest challenges of storytellers and game-makers alike. People enjoy hearing new stories and playing new games, but they also return, again and again to old stories and old games that they have experienced hundreds of times before. When content creators wish to attempt to give us something new, most of the time it is best to ground it, at least at some level, in something familiar. Likewise, when content creators wish to reach an audience with a well-worn story or a recognizable game, it is often most effective if at least something is new and fresh about the product.

With videogame narratives, the precarious balancing act between convention and invention occurs at multiple levels, and often results in failure. This is a primary cause of the risk-adverse nature of the commercial aspect of gaming, and the ubiquity of highly generic and formulaic videogames. Audiences clamor for invention and innovation, but very often choose to buy games that are like games that have played before. Inventive and innovative games are praised by critics and devoted fans, but like their literary counterparts, these games tend to suffer in sales. The vast majority of gamers end up buying the latest generic shooter, racing, and sports games over critically-acclaimed games that push the boundaries of genre and eschew established formulas. It is no surprise, then, that videogame publishers are wary of inventiveness in practice even though they tout it in the rhetoric of their advertisements. They understand that players are attracted to promises of revolutionary changes in game-play, but in practice prefer comfortable

formulas that are immediately recognizable and do not require a steep learning curve. For this reason, far more innovation occurs in videogames than actual invention, and with a few trailblazing exceptions, most successful videogame narratives strictly follow narrative and game-play conventions.

It may seem ironic that a medium so fundamentally tied to rapid technological advancement, and so steeped in the rhetoric of more—more visual detail, more immersion, and more interactive freedom—would be so dominated by slow-changing formulas and conventions. However, as we shall see, maintaining a balance between invention and convention in videogame narratives often necessitates the use of either conventional, generic game-play elements to balance out challenging, inventive narrative, or more often, conventional, formulaic narrative elements to balance out challenging, inventive game-play. There is no better example of this than one of the most inventive videogame makers of all time, Shigeru Miyamoto. Miyamoto has been the driving creative force behind some of the most popular and enduring Nintendo game franchises for nearly three decades (i.e. the Donkey Kong, Mario, Zelda, Star Fox, and Pikmin games). He is a true videogame pioneer who has invented or reinvented entire genres of play, and he was also a major creative force behind the design of the Nintendo DS and Wii, which offer new, yet remarkably intuitive and familiar ways for players to interface with videogames.¹ Miyamoto has, in short, for decades invented conventions that hundreds of other game designers follow when creating their games.

¹ Miyamoto's *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) for the NES redefined player expectations for side scrolling platform games, and *Super Mario 64* (1996) for the Nintendo 64 introduced movement through three-dimensional space into gaming, yet both games were also immediately playable, because they were as familiar as they were new, building on conventions of platform gaming and adding new elements onto that foundation. Likewise, the Nintendo DS, derided as a gimmick by early critics, took the intuitive touch-based interface of PDAs and used that as a basis for game-play. Similarly, the Wii's radical new control scheme builds on the familiar television remote control and combines that with the functionality of the computer mouse.

Yet for all of his inventiveness in terms of game-play, Miyamoto always makes sure to ground his games in something that will be familiar and comforting to players. He tries to minimize learning curves by making game-play as intuitive as possible, and he tries to create simple, endearing characters that players can identify with, and immersive worlds that players can explore. His games are also known for their simple, fairytale-like narratives that most players consciously or unconsciously recognize as embodying universal archetypes of the hero's quest (Figure 5-1). These simple narratives allow players to easily and quickly comprehend sometimes widely inventive game-play objectives contextualized in tried and true fairytales in which a male protagonist must rescue a princess and/or save the world from a powerful adversary. These simple stories, rooted in both culturally specific formulas and universally recognized archetypes give players a comfortable foundation of understanding of the game world that requires very little cognitive effort. This allows players to devote nearly all of their attention to figuring out how best to achieve the easily understood objectives of the game while facing new types of game-play challenges.

Like Eco, Miyamoto wishes to invent new types of experiences for his audiences, but grounds these experiences in familiar conventions so that they can better appreciate and adapt to what is new in his work. But balancing inventiveness is not the only function of convention at the level of an individual game. The overwhelming majority of videogame designers are not as inventive as Miyamoto; their games do not need to be grounded in something familiar so that players can focus on what is new, because there is very little that is new. Yet even the most generic and formulaic videogame narrative can and often does appeal to a large audience interested in playing a game very much like dozens of games they have played before and playing through a story very much like dozens they have experienced before. The very best

videogames do attempt to offer at least something new for players; however, inventiveness is not a requirement for a pleasurable videogame narrative. Many players often want to simply play a game that they know the rules for without having to read any directions or learn anything new. They want to know what they are getting into and what the eventual outcome of playing will be. This is the same desire that drives the popularity of popular fiction genres, and what brings people back again and again to read formulaic fiction and watch formulaic television shows and movies.

Literary and movie critics admire and applaud inventive works that eschew or transform formulaic plots and characters, because they have grown weary of them. They are like people who have been married for a long time and are looking for something new to spice up their relationship. They are tired of the same old games that formula fiction plays with its audience. They don't want novels and plays and films to always follow the pre-established set of rules dictated by formula conventions. They want to play new games as much as possible, because they are power-consumers. They read more books and see more plays or movies in a year than most people do in ten years. It is understandable that they cherish inventiveness far more than conventionality. The larger audience also appreciates inventiveness, but, for the most part, is perfectly content to enjoy a well-crafted narrative that repeats in a slightly new way a story they have experienced a thousand times before, a story that reaffirms the values they hold dear, a story that gives them comfort, just as they got comfort from hearing the same bedtime story again and again from parents when they were children.

The majority of videogame players also take pleasure in playing games for which they already know the rules, and participating in narratives in which they understand their parts and motivations. Effectively combining game genres, which are largely dictated by not only player

desires, but the limited interactive possibilities of the medium, with narrative formulas that ideally suit the restrictions of game-play mechanics is a practical and pleasurable solution to the problem of creating enjoyable videogame narratives. In the sections that follow, we will examine the videogame genres in which videogame narratives are most commonly found, the narrative formulas most commonly used in videogames, and finally how the structures of game genres and narrative formulas overlap to harmonize the combination of a pleasurable game and narrative experience.

Videogame Narrative Genres

Although videogames are a relatively new medium, the videogame industry has already gone a long way in codifying generic distinctions. The videogame industry, represented by retailers, trade magazines, and online review sites has attempted for some time to develop generic categories to more easily market videogames to those interested in certain kinds of game-play, and to give players a better sense of what to expect from specific types of videogames. The most popular of these categories have been refined to the point that videogame creators understand what is expected of them when they make a game in a particular genre, and audiences understand what to expect when they play a game marketed, for instance, as an “Adventure Game” or an “Action Game,” or a “Role-Playing Game.”² These categories, based primarily and most fundamentally (although definitely not entirely) on the primary modes of participation in the game—i.e. shooting, hiding, puzzle solving, jumping, flying, driving, fighting, etc—we will define as videogame genres.

² While a majority of games do seem to fit easily within the boundaries established by a particular genre, several games, of course, also clearly break down these conventions of genre, offering players more complex, hybrid play experiences. This is not unique to videogames, and reflects the problematic nature of genre in any medium. As Derrida points out in his essay “The Law of Genre,” every example of a particular kind of text helps unravel the very notion that we can neatly group texts together, separating them from other texts with clear and distinct boundaries. However, such distinctions, while flawed, can be useful, which is why we are pursuing them here.

Others, especially those coming from a literary perspective, such as television writer turned videogame writer Lee Sheldon, prefer to call these categories game *types*, while applying the term *genre* only to the kinds of popular narrative genres found in videogames. The term *genre*, at least when it is preceded with the adjective “popular,” is nearly interchangeable with the concept of narrative formula that we will explore in the next section. However, I have chosen the term *genre* when discussing categories of game-play, because whereas the term *formula* also refers to a set of rules by which a certain group of texts plays, the term *genre* has an additional connotative emphasis on categorization and differentiation, and as noted above, content creators, the industry, and audiences all use the primary modes of participation as the defining distinguishing characteristics when categorizing videogames. Assigning different functions to these terms also has the practical benefit of allowing us to clearly differentiate between category distinctions between game-play elements and category distinctions between narrative elements.

Regardless of what nomenclature is used, there are types of videogames in which narrative progression plays a significant role, and these videogames need to be identified and differentiated for us to have a better understanding of how and why narrative is often a driving force to game-play in these particular kinds of games. While we can find narrative elements in almost all genres of videogames, there are three main kinds of videogames in which narrative progress is typically intertwined with game-play objectives. These three game genres are *Adventure games*, *Action games*, and *Role-Playing games*.

These game genres represent broad categories, and we could further break each of them down into several sub-genres that are principally distinguished from each other within the larger category by what kind of game-play elements they borrow from the other major videogame narrative genres. For instance, many Adventure games include game-play elements common to

Action games, many Action games include game-play elements from Adventure games, and Role-playing games often include game-play elements from both Adventure and Action games. If there is enough merging of game-play elements, games are sometimes referred to as hyphenated hybrids such as Action-Adventure games, or Action-Role-Playing games. That it is difficult to clearly demarcate pure game genres is a testament to the permeability of categories in a general sense. However, it is still useful to understand the primary kinds of interaction found in videogame narratives so that we may see how narrative formulas can be overlaid onto these interactions so that the pleasures of game and narrative progression augment each other.

As a basis for our examination of these three videogame genres, we will use a classification system that digital media scholar Claus Pias detailed in his essay “Action, Adventure, Desire: Interaction with PC Games.” Pias breaks down computer games (and, for our purposes, by extension videogames on all platforms) into three basic types determined by the primary mode of interaction they require from players. Pias’ three game types are as follows: **Action games**, **Adventure games**, and **Strategy games**. It should be noted that all of these categories are broader than those typically associated with the game genres Action, Adventure, and Strategy. Pias proposes that nearly every game genre from puzzle games, racing games, shooting games, stealth games and so on can be seen as embodying three basic types of effort on the part of players. Conveniently, the three game genres most associated with videogame narratives are representative of the three categories. The genres of Action and Adventure games appropriately fit within the identically named categories Pias sets up, while Role-playing games, whose game-play conventions have their roots in strategic table-top war games, represent a genre of Strategy game as defined by Pias.

Before we examine each of these game types and their corresponding requirements in more detail, it is important to revisit arguments I have made in the preceding chapters regarding the appropriateness and desirability of combining games and narratives as they relate to the requirements of videogames, both as games and as computer programs, already place upon players. As we have seen, some critics of videogame narratives have suggested that games and narratives simply do not mix well, and that, as Greg Costikyan put it, forcing narrative elements into videogames restricts the freedom of player action inherent in games (44). I have already refuted that claim, but my argument bears reiteration here in light of our examination of the specific requirements kinds of games demand of players.

As we have seen, although videogame designers are not present with players as they play their games, the ability for videogame designers to create a participatory game world defined by rules allows them to play a proxy game with players in which they can dictate the progress of the game and even shape its players by requiring them to do certain actions to progress in the game. Likewise, in the case of games made to conform to known genres, player expectations help shape videogame designers as they craft their games. What results is the production of videogames that both require and help shape certain player behaviors and also shape the game creators who must continue to fulfill the desires of players to interact with certain kinds of game systems in a predictable and enjoyable way. This is, as we have seen, the essence of what a game is—it is a limited system, a constrained space governed by rules. Computers can allow us to do almost anything, but that freedom has no meaning without limitations. The pleasures associated with freedoms and achievements in videogames are fundamentally tied to the constraints placed on players within a game-space. This is why the complaint made by ludologists that tying game-play to narrative limits games and thus makes them less enjoyable as games is a misguided

argument. Games are fundamentally limited by the players' restricted position in the game system, the necessary boundaries placed on players' abilities within the game space, and the physical and mental challenges players must master to overcome obstacles in the game to achieve a desired goal state.

In short, a videogame, like any game, is already a restricted space that requires specific and limited actions on the part of players even without any narrative inducement. What videogame narrative creators attempt to do is provide compelling narrative motivations for game-play requirements to augment the overall pleasure of the experience for players. Doing so without encumbering game-play is a difficult task; however, when story writers and game designers work in concert, it has proven to be possible to harmonize the requirements of story progression with the requirements of game progression. In our next section, we will examine how three specific narrative formulas (horror, mystery, and science fiction/fantasy) are particularly well suited to the task of harmonizing with the major conventions of game-play that dominate the medium. Now, we will examine in more detail the three basic types of game-play requirements found in videogame narratives.

As already indicated, Pias identifies three broad categories into which videogames can fit.³ These three categories, again, are Action games, Adventure games, and Strategy games. Each of these game types requires different types of effort on the part of players. Specifically, Action games require quick reactions, Adventure games require thoughtful decision making, and Strategy games require careful planning. In the remainder of this section, we will briefly expand on these actions.

³ Pias implies universal coverage with his categories, never explicitly conceding that other types of game actions are possible. However, although this implicit claim may be debated, his categories certainly cover most if not all of the types of actions required of players of videogame narratives, and so they suit our purposes well.

Action Games

Action games require quick player reactions based on player attentiveness and reflexes. They involve players quickly reading and responding to changes enacted by the videogame program. Time and timing is critical in Action games, and thus the most successful players are those that can be properly conditioned by the game to follow the most expedient paths through the game. This conditioning is based on a feedback loop of action and reaction between the game system and its players. In this feedback loop, there is a continual progression of options that vary from least expedient to most expedient. Success in Action games requires players to be able to quickly choose and precisely execute the most expedient actions in the game space (138). The key skills involved for players of Action games are attentiveness and quick reflexes.⁴

Since Pias' description of Action games is so broad, we can fit many industry-recognized game genres within it. For instance, racing games, sports games, and shooters all require the type of player responses Pias describes. Of these, shooters are the most pertinent for our purposes, because they often incorporate narrative content to the extent that they can be classified as videogame narratives. As with all videogame narratives, Action-based videogame narratives most often rely heavily on popular fiction formulas such as science fiction, fantasy, and horror. In the next section, we will focus on how horror fiction conventions in particular mesh well with the essential game-play requirements of Action games, and especially with shooters, which often require players to kill hordes of enemies. We see this pairing of Action

⁴ This assumes that players are playing through the game for the first time. In lieu of attentiveness and reflexes, less skilled players (such as myself) can replay sections of an Action game until they learn the patterns of action required of them and advance by performing them by rote.

game mechanics and the formula conventions of horror fiction in videogame narratives such as *Clive Barker's Undying* (2001), *Silent Hill 3* (2003), and *Resident Evil 4* (2005).⁵

Adventure Games

Unlike Action games, Adventure games do not typically require players to perform time-critical actions based on reflexes. Instead, Adventure games require more thoughtful, time-consuming, logic-based decisions. Pias says of Adventure games that “the point is not to do something at the right time, but rather to make the right decision at a specific place, to go left or right, to use an object in a certain way, or to say a magic word” (138). The cognitive demands of Adventure games typically manifest themselves as puzzles that must be solved for the game to continue. Many different game genres have developed to incorporate puzzles that are most commonly found in Adventure games, however, Adventure games rely on them far more heavily than other types of games.

The high level of analytical effort required of players from Adventure games combined with their more methodical pacing led to a decline in Adventure games from their height in the early 1990s to their near extinction in the early 2000s. However, recently, Adventure games have rebounded in popularity as videogame designers remember that the best way to motivate players to solve the puzzles inherent to Adventure games is to take more care in integrating them into a fictional world and tying them to a narrative's progression. Videogame writer Lee Sheldon says of Adventure games that they “have more opportunities to tell story built into them than any other type of game” (337). Storytelling has always been an essential component of the Adventure game genre, and the fiction formula that fits best with the conventions of Adventure

⁵ Many of the games I reference in this chapter are entries into well-established franchises. As common as sequels and trilogies have become in movies, established franchises are ubiquitous in videogames. This again speaks to players enjoyment of standardization, and the industries willingness to cash in on that desire.

games is the mystery. The recent renaissance of Adventure games is dominated by mystery stories. In fact, we see this pairing of Adventure game mechanics with the formula conventions of mystery fiction in nearly every Adventure game made today. Just a few of the critically praised examples of this are *The Last Express* (1997), *Hotel Dusk: Room 215* (2007), and *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* (2005).

Strategy Games

In contrast to both Action and Adventure games, Strategy games, in their purest form, do not rely heavily on quick reactions or a succession of thoughtful decisions based on logical deduction. Instead, Strategy games emphasize careful configuration and reward players for effective organization and management skills, and patience. Strategy games require players to regulate a configuration of values (Pias 182). Strategy games are generally positional and driven by statistical advantages set up by players to achieve their ultimate goals. It may seem as though Strategy games, which emphasize a more global perspective than other types of games, would not mesh well with narrative, which is essentially the representation of individual perspectives. However, many Strategy games, and most especially Role-Playing games, incorporate extremely compelling stories that take the game-play mechanics of configuration and management and overlay them onto individual characters.

In terms of game-play, Role-Playing videogames have their roots in tabletop gaming and war games and carry many of their conventions from this background. They are also, obviously, deeply rooted in the table top Role-Playing campaigns of Dungeons & Dragons which took these conventions and incorporated storytelling elements into the play experience. As with their analogue cousins, Role-Playing videogames are almost exclusively also science fiction or fantasy stories. As we shall see in the next section, science fiction and fantasy conventions allow

Strategy game designers to have the greatest amount of variation in terms of the types of characters they create and the types of abilities these characters embody, and are thus ideally suited to creative and compelling configuration-based game-play. Again, we see this combination frequently in Strategy games and nearly universally in Role-playing games such as the wildly popular Japanese Role-Playing Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest series of games, and the equally popular Western Role-Playing game series, The Elder Scrolls.

Videogame Narrative Formulas

As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, conventions play a significant role in maintaining a culture's stability. In our entertainment, this is evident in the tremendous popularity of narratives that conform to established formulas. The commercial success of formula fiction is a testament to the desire for predictable patterns of repetition that people can easily understand and rely upon. We can see these patterns in narratives throughout recorded history, and they not only help reaffirm the specific values of a particular culture, but they often also embody more universal archetypes found in all cultures (Cawelti 733). For example, a Western or the spy story contains culturally recognized conventional settings, characters, and lines of action, but these can also be understood in the broader context of embodying archetypal patterns of the hero's quest (734). So while the specific conventions of formula fiction may change over time and from place to place, and sometimes particular popular formulas fall out of favor (like the Western), the underlying patterns of formula fiction represent a universal need for humanity to recite and consume narratives that follow familiar rules for production and reception.

In fact, in much the same way that highly inventive, experimental works such as Eco's *The Name of the Rose* can be seen as a game played between writers and readers, the rules established by formulas can be seen as the basis of a game as well. Cawelti proposes this

construct in his article “The Concept of Formula in the Study of Popular Literature,” (1972) and again, more thoroughly, in his book *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (1976). In his article, Cawelti says the following about formulas as games:

[the] game dimension of formulas has two aspects. First, there is the patterned experience of excitement, suspense, and release which we associate with functions of entertainment and recreation. Second, there is the aspect of play as ego enhancement through the temporary resolution of inescapable frustrations and tensions through fantasy. (735)

While both of these aspects of formulas have been criticized as base and simplistic, they serve a vital function to a society’s and to individual’s well being. Because of this, even the most dismissive critics of formulas, if they are honest, admit that they occasionally enjoy the escapism and exhilaration of formulas. Roger Ebert, for example, in his latest article insisting that videogames cannot be art, claims that he reads crime novels and horror stories and enjoys films such as many of the Star Wars, Indiana Jones, Harry Potter, and Spiderman movies, but only as simple diversions that have little cultural relevance. Cawalti points out, however, that these “simple diversions” do have cultural relevance, and certainly the best examples of formula fiction have a place of social import and prominence.

Cawelti emphasizes the shared ritual enjoyment of certainty involved with formulas, and likens them to other cultural shared games such as organized sports. That people are certain of the outcome of popular works governed by well-known formulas is not a drawback if creators of formula-driven works craft their narratives effectively. Like games, formulas are goal driven. Audiences know that the story will come to a clear and predictable resolution, and along the way, follow pre-established rules, just as they know when they watch a basketball game that both teams will play by established rules and one team will win and one team will lose. People desire this certainty and enjoy it as an escape from a far more complicated world in which things do not

always work out as they should. Formulas, like games, are rarely mimetic. Instead, they exist in a world clearly different from our own—a magical circle in which good defeats evil every time.

Cawelti says of this game-space dimension of formulas that it is

a culture's way of simultaneously entertaining itself and of creating an acceptable pattern of temporary escape from the serious restrictions and limitations of human life. In formula stories, the detective always solves the crime, the hero always determines and carries out justice, and the agent accomplishes his mission or at least preserves himself from the omnipresent threat of the enemy. (735)

However, that does not mean that effective formula fiction is entirely predictable. Just as with popular sports, while the rules remain the same, as do the possible outcomes, there is a great variety in the ways that these results can play out so that formula fiction, like sporting events, at its best can remain exciting and suspenseful even when nearly everything about it is predictable (735). The best formula writers seem to continually give new vitality to stereotyped characters, and provide new twists on plots or setting that do not go so far as to break the boundaries established by the conventions an audience expects a work of formula to follow (Cawelti: *Adventure* 10). As indicated in the first section of this chapter, even the most conventional works benefit from a touch of inventiveness and newness. In fact, such touches of creativity are highlighted in formulaic works. In videogame narratives that rely on popular fiction formulas, for instance, the ease with which players can understand highly formulaic narrative structures allows them to more quickly adapt to new, inventive twists on game-play. In this way, videogame narratives that are highly conventional in terms of their narrative elements can risk being a bit more inventive in terms of game-play mechanics, because the works are grounded in the larger cultural game content creators and audiences play with the production of formula-based videogames. When players are able to identify game elements quickly and easily as coinciding with the familiar plots, characters, and settings found in formula fiction, they are

more able to enjoy new, challenging aspects of a game while still being immersed in the game world.

Besides the benefits of relying on formula conventions that allow players to easily understand game-play goals as well-established narrative goals, formulas are ideally suited for videogames because of their emphasis on outcomes resulting from exhilarating, action-driven plots. Formulaic stories do not attempt to portray the world as we know it, with all of its ambiguity and uncertainty, nor do they bore us with too many mundane details. Like game spaces, the worlds of most formulaic fiction are simple and oriented by purposeful, clear lines of action. Cawelti points out that “it is almost a cliché that formulaic works stress action and plot, particularly of a violent and exciting sort...[because] in order for us to temporarily forget about our own existence and enter fully into an imaginary world, we require the strongest kinds of interest and stimulus” (14).

In formulaic works, just as in videogames, people often confront and participate in extreme acts of violence and face the excitement of the protagonist’s actions potentially resulting in death. However, in formula fiction as in most videogames, these experiences are both exciting and safe, free from not only the risks of real experiences, but also their uncertainties and ambiguities. Everything, in the end, is constrained by the limitations of the formulaic structure and the boundaries of the magic circle (16). Audiences know that in formulaic works, things will work out in the end, just as they know when they play a videogame, if they overcome the obstacles in the game, they will eventually reach the desired goal state.

Finally, formula fiction is ideally suited to videogames because players can more easily and quickly identify with formulaic characters than the more realistic and complicated characters found in more mimetic narratives. Because characters in formulaic fiction are often, at least

superficially, based on simple, stereotyped abstractions, they allow players to embody them more readily. This is similar to what happens visually with more iconic representations of characters versus more naturalistic representations in comics. As Scott McCloud points out in *Understanding Comics* (1993), readers of comics can more easily identify with iconic abstractions that seem to represent people more universally than with more naturalistic ones that are more clearly different from the majority of readers (24-59). When videogames rely on formulaic conventions, players can more easily identify with the characters they play, as they already understand them, their actions, and how these actions relate to the settings they are placed in.

If we understand formulas as structurally and functionally similar to games, it becomes obvious why they are ideally suited to being used in videogame narratives. In the remainder of this section, we will briefly examine the three most popular fiction formulas used in videogames, and identify the following narrative conventions (identified by Cawelti as the basic components of formulaic conventions) common to each: **Situations, Patterns of Action, Characters and Settings** (80). These three formulas, which are the most commonly employed in videogame narratives, are **Horror, Mystery, and Science Fiction/Fantasy**. Then, in our final section, we will explain how each of these sets of narrative conventions ideally lend themselves to the three game genres we identified in Section 2 as those most commonly embodying videogame narratives—**Action, Adventure, and Role-Playing** games.

Horror

If the popularity of formulas is rooted in their ability to allow people to escape from their everyday lives, then the success of the horror genre is certainly no surprise. One of the primary reasons for its success is the intensity of emotions it arouses. Horror stories are exhilarating and

fear-inducing, and put us in a completely different frame of mind than the one most people have on a daily basis. This is vital for a work of escapist fiction, since according to Cawelti, “the more intense our response to a work is, the more it takes us out of ourselves....[it can be] a profound experience of self-transcendence, a complete forgetting of self in the intense and momentary involvement in an external fantasy” (47-48). The intensity of horror stories is maintained by a dramatic emphasis on suspense, surprise, and shock (Sheldon 367). This is highlighted by the common conventions of situations, pattern of actions, characters, and settings found in formulaic horror stories:

- **Situations:** Horror stories typically begin with the identification of some malevolent threat. Often, this evil force is supernatural and grotesque, adding to the frightening nature of the encounter with it.
- **Pattern of Actions:** Horror stories revolve around the protagonists escaping and/or defeating the evil at the root of the horrible encounter.
- **Characters:** There are two main types of characters in horror fiction: predators and prey. Predators can take on many forms, but are often made more horrible by being grotesque versions of ourselves, as is the case in what is widely considered the first modern horror story, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). Vampires and Zombies are examples of such grotesque creatures made all the more horrible, because they resemble normal human beings. Predators may also be people, animals, supernatural beings, or alien creatures very different from us. These predators are equally frightening because of the complete Otherness. In either case, predators seek to hurt or destroy their prey. Prey exhibit a flight or fight response. They either attempt to escape from the horrors that pursue them or they attempt to fight them.

- **Settings:** Like the creatures found in horror stories, the settings common to horror stories are varied, depending on the sub-genre, but they share the common trait of being threatening and dangerous to the protagonists. Like the creatures that resemble us, some settings are frightening perversions of places we think of as safe. For example, many horror stories are set in haunted houses. Other settings are more alien, and frighten us with their unfamiliarity.

Mystery

Like horror stories, mystery stories emphasize the simplicity of right and wrong—there are those who commit crimes and there are those who solve crimes. Like horror stories, mystery stories also rely heavily on suspense. In fact, their popularity is based on the suspense of discovering how the mystery will be solved. It is important to note that the issue is not whether the mystery will be solved, but how it will be solved. As with all formulaic works, mysteries exist in a world where things are certain and orderly. Lee Sheldon, a videogame writer, echoes this sentiment about mysteries, saying of them that “they are windows on an orderly universe far removed from uncertainty and injustice that are a part of everyday life. In a well-constructed mystery story, clues are followed to a logical conclusion. There are no loose ends. Good triumphs, and evil is punished” (362). Audiences know that this will occur, and yet they still are suspenseful about how it will occur. Working through toward the closure promised in a classic mystery story is very fulfilling for audiences, just as solving a good puzzle is fulfilling. (As we shall see in our final section, these two pleasures mesh very well together). Since the classic detective story began with Edgar Allan Poe, we will rely on conventions he established in stories such as “The Murder in the Rue Morgue” (1841), in which he introduced the world the first

literary detective, C. Auguste Dupin, in outlining the formula conventions of situation, pattern of action, character, and setting in classic detective stories:⁶

- **Situations:** One might argue that the classic detective story typically begins after the principle action driving it has occurred—the unsolved crime. The discovery of a crime with no one obvious culprit is the catalyst for all detective stories.
- **Pattern of Actions:** Just as it is with Poe’s Dupin stories, all detective stories unfold based on the detective’s investigation and solution of the crime.
- **Characters:** Poe established four main roles for the detective story: “(a) victim; (b) the criminal (c) the detective; and (d) those threatened by the crime but incapable of solving it” (Cawelti: *Adventure* 91). These characters may take on many forms, but we find them, in some form, in all classic detective stories.
- **Settings:** Just as in Poe’s detective stories, most subsequent detective stories typically take place in isolated, limited spaces such as the detective’s apartment and/or the scene of the crime. This has the practical advantage of providing a finite and controlled backdrop against which clues and suspects can be highlighted (96-97).

Science Fiction and Fantasy

Like the other two formulas we have briefly examined, the formulas of Science Fiction and Fantasy apply to an extremely broad range of stories.⁷ However, like horror stories and mystery

⁶ Many theorist, such as Cawelti, distinguish between two main types of detective stories—classic and hard-boiled (43). Arthur Asa Berger adds a third type—the police procedural—in his breakdown of mystery formulas in his book *Popular Culture Genres: Theories and Texts* (82-83). While there are important distinctions between these types of stories, they are also share a core set of conventions, dating back to the first classic detective stories written by Edgar Allan Poe. For our purposes, we will focus on these commonalities to keep the categories broad, even though we can find examples of classic, hard-boiled, and police procedural stories in videogame narratives. An extensive breakdown of each type would require far more than a single chapter, and is best left for another time.

⁷ As is the case with mystery stories, science fiction and fantasy are also often broken down into subcategories. At the broadest level, science fiction is typically categorized as “hard” or “soft” depending on how much attention in the work is paid to scientific information grounded in the hard sciences versus how much attention is paid to how

stories, science fiction and fantasy stories, despite their variety, share a core set of formula traits. As with horror, science fiction and fantasy stories deal with alien beings or states, and like mystery stories, they often involve unraveling mysteries and uncovering truths through these encounters. The primary difference between science fiction and fantasy is that fantasy stories deal with magic whereas science fiction deals with technology, although there are many narratives that mix both technology and magical elements, and functionally, there is little difference between the use of technology and magic in formulaic science fiction and formulaic fantasy stories. For this reason, for our purposes of showing how their basic conventions pair with those of Strategy games, these two categories can be conflated.⁸ Both types of stories share the basic conventions of situations, pattern of actions, characters, and settings highlighted below:

- **Situations:** The principle situations at the heart of science fiction and fantasy stories are encounters with the unknown, the unusual, and often the presently impossible.
- **Pattern of Actions:** These encounters are typically driven by necessity as characters must deal with alien beings and situations during the course of a hero's journey.
- **Characters:** There are two basic types of characters found in science fiction and fantasy. There are, of course, characters radically different from those we encounter in mimetic fiction such as aliens or robots or orcs or elves. Because there is so much that is new and different in science fiction and fantasy, there are also typically protagonists that are grounded in our reality, people like those we find in other works of fiction and in our daily lives.

people respond to scientific advances emotionally and psychologically. Likewise, fantasy stories are often broken up into two main sub-categories—"high fantasy" and "sword and sorcery fantasy"—depending on how grand the scope of the story is, and how much action is involved.

⁸ Some theorists even categorize science fiction, fantasy, and horror, which all do share many conventions, under the broader heading of speculative fiction.

Often, the violent conflict between these two types of characters is made simpler and less problematic by the Otherness of those characters that can be seen as not quite human.

- **Settings:** Science fiction and fantasy stories are typically set in worlds clearly different from our own. Whether the setting is outer space, other worlds, or alternative realities, the emphasis is on place in which encounters occur that are not possible in our everyday life.

Common Game Genre and Fiction Formula Pairings

It may already be evident why fiction formulas lend themselves well to videogames. However, in this final section, we will make explicit some of the ways that game genres and fiction formulas can be integrated to form compelling videogame narratives. Many pairings of game-play genre and fiction formula would prove to be excellent illustrations of how the conventions of fiction formulas can be harmonized with requirements of game-play in ways that minimize the incongruities between game outcomes and narrative progression, and result in videogame experiences that are both enjoyable games and compelling, participatory narratives. However, the three pairings we will briefly examine in this section are particularly common and successful. These pairings are Action games and Horror formulas, Adventure games and Mystery formulas, and Role-Playing games and Science Fiction/Fantasy formulas.

Action Games and Horror Formulas

As we have established, Action games are primarily dependent on quick player reactions and involve time critical obstacles. In videogames with a strong narrative component, the reactions required of players are primarily violent acts taken against aggressive adversaries. The most common action taken against these adversaries is to injure or kill them with a variety of weapons. Players have little time to contemplate the meaning and merit of their actions in most Action games, because, again, such actions are timing critical. The mentality of a successful Action game player must be “shoot and asks questions later,” or more often, never.

Because of the nature of player actions in shooting games, horror fiction conventions in particular mesh well with them for several reasons. Shooting-based action games require players to shoot computer-controlled adversaries. Very often, these adversaries appear to be living beings put into a dramatic context to make player actions seem more meaningful. This can be ethically problematic if the computer-controlled adversaries are playful puppies or doe-eyed children; however, it is far less so if these adversaries are vicious monsters set on killing your avatar.⁹ For this reason, the vast majority of shooting games require players to shoot horrific, evil enemies such as hordes of vampires or demons or zombies. Zombies such as those found in George Romero films in particular are a very popular opponent in horror games, as their mindless aggression makes them both frightening and thrilling targets. In recent years, many games, such as the critically acclaimed and fantastically successful *Resident Evil 4* (2005) have taken their cue from horror films such as *28 Days Later* (2003) in introducing more intense, agile, and aggressive versions of zombies, which require players to react even faster to their foes, increasing the challenge and the level of adrenaline involved in defeating them.¹⁰

Resident Evil 4 builds on the conventions of story established in the early entries in the Resident Evil series, but reinvents the game-play mechanics by giving players more freedom of movement to allow them to more quickly deal with the faster, more aggressive enemies players must defeat in the game. The game also allows players more freedom to manipulate camera

⁹ Although the vast majority of creatures killed in videogames are designed to make players feel that they deserve killing, a notable example of a game challenging this convention and making players think about their actions is the Action-horror game *Bioshock* (2007). In *Bioshock*, players must confront little girls that seem to be evil. Players may choose to kill these little girls to harvest their energy, or to save them. It is a disturbing choice, but in the end, players who choose to save the little girls are rewarded and players who choose to destroy them are punished by not being able to achieve the game's ultimate happy ending. *Bioshock* is set in an Ayn Rand inspired dystopia, and has been praised as a stinging indictment of Objectivism.

¹⁰ The enemies in *Resident Evil 4* are actually not zombies in the classical sense of plodding brain eaters risen from the dead. The enemies players must kill in *Resident Evil 4*, called Los Ganados (Spanish for herd or mob) are actually humans infected with mind-controlling parasites. As in the movie *28 Days Later*, who were infected with a virus, these "super" zombies are far more formidable adversaries.

angles in the game to give them a better sense of what is around them, and provides laser sights on players' weapons to give them better accuracy when shooting enemies. The changes in gameplay in *Resident Evil 4* from earlier entries in the series are significant, and required players familiar with the franchise to learn several new things. However, the game still faithfully follows the formula of horror stories, and so grounds players in the familiar, and minimizes the amount of thought they must put into the purpose and righteousness of their actions.

As with all formulaic horror stories, *Resident Evil 4* begins with the identification of an evil threat. In this case, familiar protagonist Leon Kennedy, the hero of *Resident Evil 2* (1998), is sent on a mission to rescue the President's daughter, Ashley Graham, who has been kidnapped by a mysterious cult, that is believed to have taken her to a secluded rural European village. Leon Kennedy travels to this secluded village only to find hordes of enemies waiting for him. The majority of these enemies are parasite infected cult followers serving Osmund Sadler, the leader of the cult, and the primary antagonist of the story. Sadler plans on infecting Ashley and using her to infect her father so that Saddler can control him. Once this premise is established, the action unfolds around Leon fighting or fleeing from various enemies (Figure 5-2).

Besides the villagers, there are several more formidable creatures more horrifying and challenging to defeat. The predator characters thus run the gambit from those disturbingly like ourselves to those horrifyingly different. Leon, whom the player controls, must defeat these creatures to save and then protect Ashley. The players' desire to defeat these creatures is heightened by having to protect Ashley who, unlike Leon, is relatively defenseless. The prowess Leon displays in defeating these creatures, augmented by his impressive array of weaponry, is quite empowering for players so used to being vicariously frightened by such creatures as they helplessly read about them or watch them advance ominously in movies and on television.

Finally, as is typical to horror stories, *Resident Evil 4* is set in an isolated, unfamiliar place, which adds to the fear that players feel. While helper characters such as Ada Wong appear in the game to aide Leon on his quest, by and large, Leon is alone, often with limited ammunition facing hordes of frightening creatures bent on his destruction. It is a frightening and exhilarating experience. Players are made aware that the only thing standing between the horrors of the game and the game world at large is them, imbuing their actions with more meaning and purpose and thus the narrative elements of the game add to the player's pleasure and sense of accomplishment in achieving the game's objectives.

Adventure Games and Mystery Formulas

Action games typically require players to engage in acts of simulated violence, and thus are particularly well-suited to horror formulas that help justify these acts in the game space. Adventure games, on the other hand, typically require players to make slower-paced, thoughtful puzzle-solving decisions, and thus are particularly well suited to mystery formulas in which the motivations for acts of violence are discovered, and the solution to a crime is pieced together. In the early years of videogames, when the processing power required to render real-time action made Action orientated games far less visually sophisticated, Adventure games enjoyed widespread popularity as much for the spectacle of beautifully rendered backgrounds and character animations as for their puzzle-based game-play. However, as computer processing power has increased and graphic and programming technologies have matured, and Action games have caught up and surpassed Adventure games visually, Adventure games have dwindled in popularity. The demands of puzzle solving without the adrenaline payoff found in action orientated games are pleasurable only to a small niche market. However, recently,

Adventure gaming has had a bit of a resurgence as a result of Adventure game designers focusing on providing players with strong narrative content that helps motivate player efforts.

The resurgence of Adventure games on the PC and especially on the Nintendo DS, which approximates the point and click, clue hunting interface of the PC, speaks to the desire of players for strong narrative motivators in their videogames. The most obvious and natural narratives for the Adventure genre is the mystery or detective story. Adventure game makers recognize this convergence as indicated by the fact that the overwhelming majority of Adventure games rely heavily on mystery fiction formulas. In some cases, this is immediately obvious to even the non-gaming public as many titles are simply adaptations of popular formulaic mystery works. Scores of games based on the adventures of Sherlock Holmes or Nancy Drew abound on store shelves, as are games based on the work of Agatha Christie, such as *Agatha Christie: And Then There Were None* (2005). It is with remarkable ease that formulaic mysteries can be adapted to serve Adventure game genre conventions.

For instance, in the Nintendo DS Adventure game *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* (2005), we find all of the elements of a classic detective story (Figure 5-3).¹¹ As with most classic detective stories, *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* begins each case with the discovery of a crime (the player must solve five criminal cases, each progressing in difficulty and complexity). The titular character is a young, inexperienced defense attorney whose first case is presented to him by his childhood friend, Larry Butz, who has been accused of murder. Convinced of his friend's innocence, Phoenix must investigate the crime to discover the true culprit, and more importantly, discover evidence that will vindicate Larry and put the real killer behind bars. The initial case,

¹¹ *Phoenix Wright* was originally published in Japan under the title *Gyakuten Saiban Yomigaeru Gyakuten* (2001) where the comical and engaging characters proved so popular that several sequels were made, and years later, these games were adapted for American audiences. These adaptations have proven wildly successful and have sparked new games in the series to be produced and have helped reestablish the Adventure game as a commercially viable genre.

as with all of the subsequent cases in the game, revolve around Phoenix first being presented with the crime, then investigating the crime, and finally presenting the evidence discovered in court. In this way, the formula is very similar to that found in popular television courtroom mystery series such as *Perry Mason* and *Matlock*.

Cawelti says of mystery narratives that they all involve “the isolation of clues, the making of deductions from these clues, and the attempt to place the various clues in their rational place in a complete scheme of cause and effect” (43). This is obviously ideally suited to Adventure games, which primarily involve the solving of puzzles. Cawelti also says of mystery stories that inherent to them is an “underlying moral fantasy that all problems have a clear and rational solution” (43). This fantasy, one might argue, is also a driving imperative in our desire to solve puzzles and the pleasure we derive from doing so. In the Phoenix Wright games, players not only get to solve puzzles, but in doing so, they get the added feeling of accomplishment that they are solving a crime that saves the life of one wrongly accused and ensures the punishment of the actual criminal.

This combination of puzzle-solving game-play and murder mystery storylines plays out with all of the principle characters found in the conventional murder mystery. In each of the cases that the player plays through, we find all four of the main character roles Poe established as essential to the mystery formula: we find the victim who has been killed, the real criminal who must be discovered and brought to justice, those threatened by the crime but incapable of solving it (in the first case, this is Phoenix Wright’s dear friend, Larry Butz), and finally, the detective himself, in this case, the young attorney, Phoenix Wright.

Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney also follows the formula conventions of setting in a mystery story. In each case, there are a limited number of locations to explore. The primary locations

that the player as Phoenix are confined to are the scene of the crime during the investigative phase, and the court room in the revelation phase. During the investigation phase, Phoenix may also visit other locations to gather information and clues; however, all of these locations are relatively small spaces that provide a clear, limited backdrop against which clues and suspects can be highlighted. All of this, the familiar conventions of situation, action, character, and setting, give players a familiar grounding that allows them to easily understand the context for their actions within the game that makes the game much easier to learn how to play and much more enjoyable to play as well.

Role-Playing Games and Science Fiction/Fantasy Formulas

Whereas Action games rely on quick reactions, and Adventure games rely on deductive decision making, Role-Playing games typically require players to manage items, configure parties of playable characters, and strategically choose match ups of skills, spells, weapons and characters that are most advantageous to the player in a given conflict. Most role-playing games combine this strategy-based game-play with the narrative conventions of science fiction and fantasy. This combination has proven to be so ubiquitous and commercially successful for several reasons. Lee Sheldon identifies five of these reasons (348):

1. Some of the first Role-playing games were based on the stories found in *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns, thus ensuring a built-in audience already familiar with the narrative and game-play conventions.
2. There continues to be great cross-over appeal to the (still) statistically significant demographic of adolescent males who are attracted to science fiction and fantasy fiction.
3. These are the fiction genres game makers (predominately computer geeks) prefer, and so are the most likely to be adapted to videogames.

4. Both genres allow for a wide range of solutions to fiction-breaking game problems like character death and healing.
5. The locales of both are flexible and the rules of physics are more bendable than in mimetic fiction.

All of these reasons have likely contributed to the widespread use of science fiction and fantasy in not just role-playing games, but all genres of videogame narratives. However, reasons 4 and 5 are particularly pertinent to the specific success of combining science fiction and fantasy stories with strategy-based game-play. As I've indicated throughout this work, the most successful videogame narratives are those in which game-play and narrative elements are integrated as naturally and fluidly as possible. The game-play requirements of strategy games seem to present a particularly difficult task in this regard, because they emphasize the management of characters, items, and positions in ways that seem to devalue the individual pieces in relation to the larger whole of the game-play objectives. For instance, in a game of chess, a player may find it more advantageous to sacrifice a key piece to gain positional superiority in the game, aiding the player in achieving ultimate victory. This is a calculating approach, and one that makes players adopt a rather callous attitude toward individual assets, in much the same that real life military leaders often focus on achieving tactical victories at the expense of individual soldiers.

However, role-playing games are able to overcome, to an extent, this callousness and detachment by relying on science fiction and fantasy conventions. Role-playing games, like all strategy games do require players to take possession of a limited set of assets and manipulate those assets to achieve ultimate victory. Yet this is accomplished while still allowing players to care about their avatar and the other related characters in his or her party by naturalizing the

necessary mechanisms of regeneration and resurrection that such game-play inevitably will lead to.

It would be nearly impossible for players to simultaneously engage in global positioning, strategy-based game-play that puts their avatars at risk and often results in the avatar's injury or even death and care about those characters in the context of mimetic storytelling. However, in a science fiction or fantasy context, players can expend all of their resources, from ammunition to emotionally developed allies and even the player avatar itself to achieve guilt-free victories, because of the allowable safety valves of technology and magic that ensure items can be replenished and characters can be healed or resurrected. To better illustrate this, let us examine the four conventional elements of science fiction and fantasy—situations, patterns of actions, characters, and settings—as they appear in one of the latest incredibly popular Pokemon role-playing games, *Pokemon Diamond* (2006).

In *Pokemon Diamond*, as in all of the Pokemon games, we find an initial situation dealing with an encounter with the unknown. The player plays as either Dawn (female) or Lucas (male) as she or he sets out to discover new, more powerful pokemon to capture and train in the quest to become the ultimate pokemon trainer, and to gain enough power to defeat Team Galactic and their leader Cyrus who, it is revealed, wishes to destroy all life on the planet and then give rise to a new Eden where all of his creations will live in peaceful service to him. To achieve this ultimate goal, the player must encounter and collect various pokemon (short for “pocket monsters”). Many of these creatures are very much like the creatures we find in fairytales, myths, and legends, and all of them have fantastic powers that can be strengthened through battles with wild pokemon and antagonistic pokemon trainers.

During the course of the hero's journey, the player encounters a host of characters ranging from other pokemon trainers, some good and helpful, some bad and a hindrance, to all sorts of pokemon, many of whom are friendly and take on human attributes. Players are encouraged to become particularly attached to some of their pokemon through growing fond of their unique personalities and abilities and through the continual nurturing required to ensure their growth in strength—a necessity in the game since strong pokemon are vital to the achievement of game-play objectives.¹² Players are only capable of both developing attachments to these fantastical creatures and sending them into battle where they may be harmed by the magical powers of their adversaries by the knowledge that within the game world there exists technology that can rejuvenate and resurrect their fallen allies. Trainers capture and tame the wild pokemon with the technological marvel, the poke-ball, which shrinks down the pokemon small enough to fit into a pocket, and puts the pokemon in a state of stasis. This also allows trainers to recall pokemon who are injured or completely out of hit points (since this is a children's game, the pokemon are not said to be dead) and rejuvenate or resurrect the pokemon with the aide of additional technology and a pokemon nursing staff at a pokemon station. Likewise, this conceit allows players to feel little or no guilt when they command their cute little pokemon to harm or kill other cute little pokemon in the wild or even when they are being controlled by bad trainers (Figure 5-4).

Finally, the setting of the Pokemon universe allows all of these conventions to seem acceptable, as it is clearly a radically different place than our own world. It is a place where creatures such as Pokemon can exist and the technology to capture and heal them exists too. It is also a place where children are allowed to roam the countryside for much of their childhood

¹² Player success is not only determined by having high-level, battle tested pokemon, but by using these pokemon effectively in what amounts to paper-rock-scissor battles in which certain pokemon types and certain attack types are most effective against specific opponents.

seeking pokemon and training them without adult supervision or educational requirements. It is also a place that encourages said children to engage in dangerous, world-saving battles with evil antagonists armed with powerful magical creatures. Yet as absurd as it all sounds, it works in much the same way that the Harry Potter books work for their target audience. The formula conventions of science fiction and fantasy mesh well with the game-play requirement of role-playing games, allowing players to engage and immerse themselves in compelling videogame narrative experiences.

As we have seen, game-play requirements can be at odds with the expectations of mimetic fiction. However, many videogame narrative designers overcome these limitations by overlapping generic game-play requirements with formula conventions in a way that effectively harmonize the sometimes competing demands of telling a compelling story and creating an enjoyable game. While both videogames and narratives that follow the conventions of a particular formula are often criticized by scholars and cultural elites, as Cawelti has pointed out, and millions of consumers have verified, generic and formulaic works that rely heavily on conventions play an important role in a culture's well being. In the medium of the videogame, without the known, safe, comforting conventions of formula fiction, many inventive game-play elements would not be possible, and many innovative and challenging games would not be enjoyable.

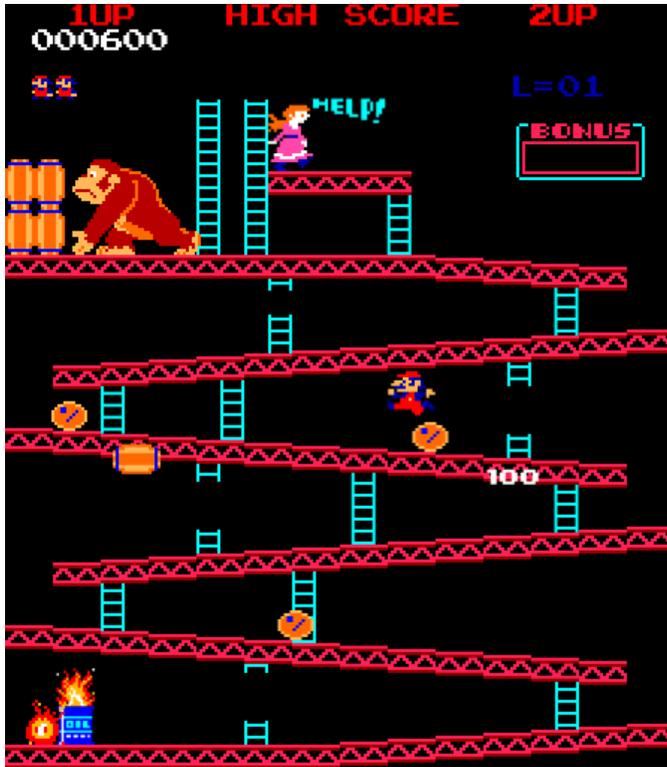


Figure 5-1. In *Donkey Kong* (1981), Jumpman (later known as Mario) enacts a classic fairytale staple plot—he must overcome obstacles put in place by a villain to rescue Pauline, a damsel in distress. Miyamoto’s subsequent games have placed the damsel farther away, and made the obstacles more varied and challenging, but the basic story remains the same.



Figure 5-2. *Resident Evil 4* (2005), Leon Kennedy faces mobs of parasite-controlled villagers that behave very much like the aggressive zombies now typically found in zombie films.



Figure 5-3. In *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* (2005), players must present evidence they have found in the right order to ensure they solve the case and free their clients.



Figure 5-4. In *Pokemon Diamond* (2006), players pit cute little fantasy creatures in battles to the death. The battles are guilt-free, however, thanks to technology that allows them to be resurrected.

CHAPTER 6
LOOKING FORWARD: THE FUTURE OF VIDEOGAME NARRATIVES

Current State of the Art

Once upon a time our ancestors drew on cave walls, and grunted out tales of woolly mammoth hunts and saber tooth tiger attacks. Once upon a time they pretended they were mammoths and saber tooth tigers and chased each other across the plains. Millennia later, Sumerians regaled each other with tales of Gilgamesh and Enkidu to express feelings about friendship and immortality while the Ancient Egyptians played Senet to pass the time when they weren't building pyramids. In short, humans tell stories and play games; we always have. In fact, stories and games are so foundational to the human experience that a definition of our species is incomplete without their inclusion. We are *Homo Narrans* (tellers of tales), and we are *Homo Ludens* (players of games); sometimes we do both at the same time. Videogame narratives have come a long way in allowing us to do just that.

Distinct modes of enculturation and entertainment, games and stories work well on their own, but they have also shared frequent and successful collaborations. Some game theorists see game-play and storytelling as opposing forces that are better off separated.¹ History, however, shows us that this is not always the case—not now, and not thousands of years ago when the Sphinx was asking Oedipus riddles. It is not surprising really. In fact, the potential profitability of combining our two most ubiquitous and ancient forms of entertainment and enculturation makes mixing stories and games a capitalistic inevitability. So in this respect, and given the historical precedents we have examined, which indicate our inherent appetite for interactive,

¹ Perhaps precisely because narrative and play are such fundamental components of every culture, the convergence of narrative and games has become a critical point of contention within the emerging field of games studies. In what has been labeled the “narratology versus ludology debate” several researchers have taken sides on whether games should be studied as types of narratives. The more extreme ludologists such as Greg Costikyan and Markku Eskelinen display an anti-narrative bias in their research, creating hierarchies in which the more a game is confined by be structured like a narrative, the less like a game it becomes (Costikyan 44 and Eskelinen 36).

playful narratives, once computers made them possible, videogame narratives were an evolutionary certainty.

Of course, the development of videogame narratives has not been without their growing pains. Making the combination of games and narratives work in this medium can be hit or miss and has turned out to be highly controversial both among game developers and game theorists. Many have asked, “is it worth the effort,” and “is this what people really want?” What should be clear by now is that videogame narratives are not a passing fad, or some doomed-to-fail intermediary stage in the evolution of videogames. Videogame narratives represent a desire for participation that has been a part of our narrative DNA from the beginning of humanity. The computer revolution has helped show us the joys of interactive narrative, and there is no going back—videogame narratives are here to stay.

A Tale of Two Pleasures?: Playing Videogame Narratives has sought to address the controversies surrounding the study of videogame narratives by attempting to show the extent to which games and narratives are fundamentally aligned, without making the mistake of conflating the two distinct forms. In this final chapter, we will further examine how games and narratives can merge and are merging in ways that are both familiar and excitingly new. In the pages that remain, we will examine how videogame narratives, freeing to creators and players in some ways, but limiting in others, fit within the current narrative media ecology, and how videogame narratives may continue to develop in the near future.

Specifically, in the two remaining sections of this work, we will examine the current state of videogame narratives and their possible future by looking at how they are converging with other narrative media and how they are also diverging as well. Political scientist Ithiel de Sola Pool anticipated our current era of media transition in his 1983 book *Technologies of Freedom*.

In it, he explains that the lines between media are blurring, and media content is increasingly going to flow across multiple media platforms, and these media platforms are increasingly becoming capable of being used in multiple ways (23). The computer is at the heart of this phenomenon, which Henry Jenkins examines as it is happening today in his 2006 book *Convergence Culture*. Computer technologies have allowed content producers to distribute their content across multiple media platforms, and have allowed consumers to have access to content in multiple ways. Today, if people want to watch a movie, they can watch it on their television at home, or on their PC, or download it to a portable device such as a video iPod, or a video-capable cell phone.

In many ways, cell phones are the epitome of media convergence. Increasingly, cell phones have become everything machines, capable of doing everything from making phone calls, to playing music or videos or games, to balancing a checking account and keeping track of appointments, to taking pictures or video, to giving directions with built in GPS systems, to checking email, to web-surfing, and who knows what else in the future. At the same time, more and more devices are being developed to do all of these things as well. While all of the above mentioned functions have merged into a single device, the cell phone, dozens of other devices—MP3 players, portable movie players, GPS devices, and portable gaming devices—continue to saturate the market. So while screens are converging, allowing what used to be considered separate functions to be performed on one device, the delivery mechanisms of media content continue to diversify and diverge.

As we have learned from Marshall McLuhan, a medium is not just a formless carrier of content, but a vessel that shapes that content. Therefore, when screens converge, and narrative content that was once available through only one medium becomes available across multiple

media platforms, challenges arise in ensuring a smooth adaptation, especially when the adaptation involves moving from a non-participatory medium such as a movie theater to a participatory one such as a videogame console. Likewise, as media content, and in particular narrative content, expands into different media platforms, it must adapt itself to be best suited to that platform to ensure that it remains a viable consumer option in a media ecology in which consumer choices are tremendously varied, and competition is thus extremely fierce.

In our next section, titled “Successful Convergences,” we will examine how the medium of the videogame shapes the narratives that are adapted to it, what sort of narratives can best be adapted to it, and how they can best be adapted from other narrative media. The focus of “Successful Convergences” will be on what are by far the most frequent and financially lucrative examples of narrative convergence between videogames and another entertainment medium—the adaptation of movies into games. We will examine what many videogame designers have learned the hard way—that while film and videogames have converged in many ways, sharing similar production and funding models, and even many of the same narrative techniques, they are still fundamentally different narrative media, and much effort must be made to adapt stories from the silver screen to the participatory play-spaces of videogame narratives.

While videogame narratives have been significantly influenced by the convergence of videogames and films in terms of production, funding, and techniques of audio-visual narrative expression, the narrative possibilities of the medium are also expanding in new directions as fast as the technology is advancing. More sophisticated audio and visual capabilities have allowed videogames to look and sound more and more like movies. However, the continued development of the Internet and growing broadband access has allowed for both major videogame publishers and independent videogame developers to expand the types of videogame

narratives that can be created. Focusing on how these expansions in the possibilities of production, distribution, and access are affecting who creates videogame narratives and to what end will be the purpose of our final section, “Possible Divergences.” What we discover, when we begin to look at the types of narratives beginning to emerge from these new avenues of production and distribution is that while videogame narratives have come a long way in terms of the types of stories being enacted in the medium, we are still a long way from exhausting the possibilities of combining stories and games in profoundly enjoyable and moving ways.

Successful Convergences

When we look at the growth of the videogame as a medium in general, and the development of videogame narratives in particular, what we discover is that the types of games and the types of stories that we encounter in videogames are expanding both to conform and converge with other narrative media and in the other direction, away from what is currently being done in other narrative media. This convergence is a two way street, and we could spend time examining the impact videogame narratives have had on television, books, comics, and especially film.² We could also address the difficulties movie-makers face when trying to take a videogame narrative and adapt it to the screen, as is increasingly becoming common.³ However, our focus in this section is on how narrative content must be adapted to the medium of the

² Just two examples of the effects videogames are having on movies is the increased usage of first-person perspective in movies, and the usage of “re-playability” in movies such as in *Run Lola Run* in which segments of the film are rewound and replayed with different conclusions. For an excellent collection of essays that examine the impact of videogames on film and film on videogames more extensively, see *ScreenPlay: Cinema /Videogames/Interfaces* (2002).

³ Because of the lucrative built-in audience for game-to-movie adaptations, despite some early dismal failures, such as the much maligned *Super Mario Brothers* (1993) and *Double Dragon* (1995), movie studios keep churning out videogame based movies. Practice seems to have paid off, at least at the box office, with more recent efforts not only being panned slightly less harshly by critics, but also doing much better in terms of tickets sold. The infamously untalented game-to-movie director Uwe Boll excluded, many more recent adaptations have done very well on the big screen and in DVD sales, with money-makers such as the *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill* franchises. Things should only improve if the videogame blockbusters such as *Halo* and *Max Payne* make it to theaters as promised.

videogame, not from it, and so here we will examine how convergence between film and videogames affects how narrative content created for other media is shaped in the interactive play-space of the videogame.

Before we examine the specific challenges videogame makers face when trying to convert narrative content into a videogame, it is important that we understand just how prevalent media convergence of narrative content is, and how common it is to see popular stories end up as videogame narratives. Henry Jenkins defines convergence as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (2). This certainly describes contemporary corporate synergy strategies and contemporary consumer expectations. To illustrate the depth and breadth of media convergence, let us take, as an example, the great comic book icon, Spider-Man.

Spider-Man, of course, began as a comic book character in 1962. Since his birth in that medium, however, his stories have been told on nine different animated and live action American television shows (and counting), in non-illustrated novels, as part of a theme park ride at Universal Studios, and in dozens of videogames on over a dozen different gaming platforms. In fact, Spider-Man has become so popular, and is such an important part of the Sony brand, that they used the Spider-Man movie font for their Playstation 3 logo. When a new Spider-Man movie comes out, it has become expected that a videogame will be released within a week of its theater premiere. Spider-Man is one of the most successful brands to develop in recent years, but it is by no means unusual. Today, when the gaming public sees a blockbuster movie with lots of action (lots of action is key), especially one directed toward a younger crowd, they know that if they wish, they are very likely to find a videogame release related to that movie. In fact, a

significant portion of the videogames released and sold each year are movie tie-ins, and many of these movies, in turn, were once books or comics.

Of course, many of these movie tie-ins are little more than cash-grabs—barely playable, hackneyed attempts at recycling the movie’s plot, or poorly conceived narrative extensions built loosely on the movie’s script. Most of them end up as critically panned disasters bought by masses of unknowing parents for children with undiscerning gaming palates who just want a taste of the experience of playing a game as Superman, or swimming around as a fish from *Finding Nemo*, or uncovering dark secrets at Hogwarts along with Harry Potter and his followers. However, if game developers want to attempt to create a compelling videogame narrative based on a narrative created for another narrative media, and they are allowed to have the time and resources to do so (a rare occurrence), they can produce well-received, fun-to-experience videogame narratives, as we shall see in a moment. In doing so, though, they must face and overcome significant challenges. There are serious differences between videogames and a medium like film that make translating what works in one to the other a difficult task. In fact, many of the successful “adaptations” of movies to games aren’t really adaptations at all. Many games forego trying to tell the same story that the movie told, and instead try to put players in the same narrative world, and allow them to experience a different story. Some games certainly do simply attempt to make the movie experience an interactive, game experience; however, besides the obvious drawbacks in terms of lessening the narrative tension involved in the game narrative, there are often other drawbacks to consider as well.

This is because some stories translate more effectively to the medium of the videogame than others, and the right choices must be made by game designers and writers in terms of what narrative content to adapt and what narrative content needs to be re-imagined inside the

interactive, narrative space of a game. Two of the most crucial things that writers and directors must face if they are to effectively adapt a movie into a game lie in the representational restrictions currently found in videogames: 1. In videogames, all time is spatialized, and all spaces are spaces of navigation and 2. Because gamers typically navigate in the game world as one character, perspective shifts within game play are usually limited.

As Lev Manovich observes in his book *The Language of New Media* “new media spaces are always spaces of navigation” (252). Therefore, controlling the players navigation through the game-space is essential to the progression of the game:

in *Doom* and *Myst*—and in a great many other computer games—narrative and time itself are equated with movement through 3-D space...in contrast to modern literature, theater, and cinema, which are built around psychological tensions between characters and movement in psychological space, these computer games return us to ancient forms of narrative in which the plot is driven by the spatial movement of the main hero (245-46).

In a videogame narrative, the player has an active role in the narrative progression, and this progress is represented, in large part, by the movement of the player’s avatar through the game-space along one of the restricted trajectories set up by game designers. As Manovich puts it, “rather than being narrated to, the player herself has to perform actions to move narrative forward” (247). This progression through game-space toward goal states is exactly what makes videogame narratives engaging and pleasurable interactive narrative experiences, so it is vital that the narrative actions in a game emphasize player movement and progression toward goal states.

In addition to emphasizing narrative goals that encourage player movement through game space, videogame developers must also deal with the issue of authorial control that we have examined throughout this work. In the case of adaptations from film, game developers must figure out how to maintain narrative tension while giving up much of the control of the

camera that film directors and cinematographers have. In film, the role of the camera is as crucial as the role of the narrator in books. The camera acts as the narrator in a movie, fulfilling a similar function in a different way. Seymour Chatman explores the differences between the camera's eye and the narrator's voice in his essay "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa)." Chatman addresses the two independent temporal orders of narrative: the time of the plot and the time of the presentation of the plot. In written works, such as a novel, the time of the plot often stops and a writer spends the time describing a scene and its characters and actions. The way in which the scene is described communicates the perspectives of the narrator. The camera can do the same thing differently through the angle, placement, and juxtaposition of shots. The director can still express perspective and opinion, just as the writer can in his description. Likewise, videogames can interject opinion within cut-scenes that can use all of the same techniques we see in film.

The difference in games, however, is that, for the most part, directors have to give control of the camera to the players and trust the players will see what the director wants them to see. This process is one of trust—trust in the player to take the camera and not ruin the story in the process. But this is not a leap of blind faith. Though perspective shifts are limited in games, different perspectives are possible and opinions can be expressed as the game designers guide the players through the narrative game-space. Videogame designers just have to see their job differently. Rather than completely controlling what a player sees and does, they must guide players along certain paths. For this reason, Henry Jenkins identifies game designers not as simply story tellers, but narrative architects who must build a narrative world around players that ensure their progression (*First Person*: Jenkins 121).

In Chapter 4, we examined how authors in print often also emphasize world building over word usage. Umberto Eco said that his job as an author is to create a narrative space for his readers. The difference, of course, in videogames is that players have more control over how they move through that narrative space. To control player movement through a space in which they seemingly can do whatever they want, game designers rely on *affordances* and *schemas* within the narrative that naturalize the limitations for player interaction. This allows a balance between player digression and exploration on the one hand, and the continued movement through the plot on the other.

The idea of schemas, or scripts, comes from cognitive psychology and is based on our reliance on past experience in determining our actions in a given place or situation. In one respect, they can be thought of as deeply ingrained social conventions. For instance, when we go into a restaurant, those of us who have been to restaurants and learned the restaurant schema know that certain behavior is acceptable or required and certain behavior is not. We order from the waiter, or at a counter, but we do not strip naked and scream loudly, because this is not appropriate to the situation. Variations, of course, exist, and with each new restaurant experience our schema expands and becomes more complex. Within the narrative framework of a videogame, designers can use schemas to reasonably limit or anticipate players' behavior.

To illustrate how this works, let us briefly examine what is widely considered the best videogame narrative based on a movie to date (in fact, it was far more well-received than the movie itself)—*The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay* (2004). Heralded as one of the best single player actions games released in 2004, the game takes place in the narrative universe created by the movies *Pitch Black* (2000) and *The Chronicles of Riddick* (2004). Vin Diesel, an avid gamer, reprised his role as the anti-hero Richard B. Riddick, lending his voice

and his likeness to the videogame protagonist. The game takes characters, themes, settings, and plot points from both films, but serves as a prequel to the movies. Because most players are already familiar with the narrative elements of Riddick's universe, they bring to the game an understanding of who Riddick is, and how they should act as they play him. Because the game is a single player action game experienced primarily by the player in first person, genre conventions of the first person action game also inform player expectations as well.

However, even for those players who are not familiar with the movies, or the genre conventions of first person action games, the game's setting, characters, and plot quickly give players a sense of what they should be doing. *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay* is set in Butcher Bay, a notorious triple max security prison—the science fiction equivalent of Alcatraz. Such contained spaces for videogame narratives are ideal, because they help naturalize the limitations of player movement throughout the game. We cannot, in this “triple max prison,” ask our fellow prisoners if they would like to have afternoon tea with us, nor can we, as Riddick, break out into show tunes, because there is no schema in place for this type of behavior within the narrative universe, and in a tough, dingy prison setting. Likewise, the titular character, Riddick, is not a tabula rasa, an empty shell we fill in the game, but an established, fully formed character to whom we are introduced to early in the game through events that Diesel narrates and which establish the sort of character players are playing as in the game. Players are made to understand that while they can control his movement and interaction within the limits of the navigable space of the prison, they cannot fly, or teleport, or even say things that Riddick would not say in the context of the story. Players are limited by the character's abilities, such as his impressive strength and stealth and his night-vision enhanced eyes. They understand this and do not try to do things that don't fit a prison schema, the stealth-action game

schema, or things that will hinder their abilities to reach their narrative driven game objectives, which ultimately involve, as the title of the game makes clear, escaping from Butcher Bay.

Another method employed by designers to naturalize gaming limitations thus adding to the illusion of freedom within the game-space is building in affordances into the game. *Affordance* is a term Donald Norman uses in his book *The Design of Everyday Things*. He defines affordance as “the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used” (9). For example, in *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay*, players learn quickly that they, as Riddick, are able to move more silently if they move more slowly and crouch low to the ground, and that if they are in the shadows, antagonist non-player characters are less likely to spot them. Therefore, players take the affordance of sneaking and hiding into the game world. In other words, players are given signs about what affordances they can take from the real world and apply to the game world. As long as these affordances are reasonably consistent and numerous, players allow themselves to overlook the many things they cannot do in the game-space. Cell doors can be opened, people can be talked to, grates can be removed and air ducts traveled through, items can be picked up and used, so that is what we do, and the option to do so seems like the freedom of interactivity, but of course it is a very limited interaction (Figure 6-1). Players cannot do many things within the game-space, but this is covered up in large part by schemas which dictate what players should expect from the game and how they should act.

All of this, if done well, creates the illusion of freedom of interaction within the game-space, covering up the gaps and missing pieces that filmmakers do not have to worry about since they always control the audiences movement through the narrative. The effectiveness of *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay* as a videogame narrative lies in the freedom it

allows participants to digress and explore multiple paths while keeping them moving along the main path of the narrative. The difficulties that the designers of this game dealt with successfully center on the crucial balance that must be maintained between controlling the participants enough so that they may become immersed in the narrative, and allowing them enough freedom to interact with and influence the specifics of the progression of that narrative. In so doing, the creators of this game offer the player a rich and pleasurable interactive narrative experience, and provide a model for future videogame narratives that wish to do the same.

Possible Divergences

While some videogame narratives try to become more like interactive movies, other videogame narratives have developed along paths that embrace the participatory nature of the medium in new ways, and further morph the roles of game makers and players. In this final section, we will briefly explore two of the main ways that videogame narratives are developing in new directions. First, we will explore how the corporate institutions that govern videogame production have shaped videogame narratives in the past, and how new corporate ideologies are shaping videogames in the present and near future. Then, we will turn to how an increasingly participatory culture of gamers are driving the medium forward on the Internet and challenging our notions of the relationship between authors and audiences in ways that bring to life some of the worst fears of videogame critics such as Roger Ebert, and, at the same time, make possible some of the greatest dreams of millions of avid videogame fans.

It may strike some as ironic that a medium heralded (and decried) as liberating for content creators and their audiences is governed by institutions that are historically, and one might argue inherently, restrictive. Hardware makers control everything. They dictate not only how games are made, and how players interface with games, but they also dictate what games are made and are playable on their consoles. There is a long history of litigation around

licensing dating back to Nintendo's first generation console, the Nintendo Entertainment System, and the console market, by and large, is a very controlled, restricted environment. The PC market is far more open, even though game makers must ensure their products run on nearly limitless hardware configurations, but PC game sales are dwarfed by their console and handheld counterparts. Proprietary formats dominate the console market, and historically, all content outside of that which is created for the PC, and by homebrew hackers, is controlled by hardware makers through the limitations of the hardware and through the ideological restrictions the hardware companies place on third party publishers—in the end, if Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo do not want a game released for their platforms, it will not become a home console game.⁴

Some individuals have attempted to break the cartel-like stranglehold that two or three companies have had on the home console market at any given time over the last two decades. Many lawsuits were filed against Atari and Nintendo in the 1980s, but they all failed to break the proprietary system that continues to be in place (Kent 371-376). For decades now, if a game publisher wishes to produce a game that can be playable on a home videogame console, it must seek permission from the console maker and pay it a fee that now ranges up to as much as \$10 million. Additionally, because the cost of development for each of these proprietary platforms can be prohibitive for independent developers and smaller publishers, many videogame makers are forced into releasing their games on just one console, and many more are persuaded into exclusivity deals that ensure for the hardware makers market-place differentiators, but limit the potential audience for the game to those who own that particular console.

⁴ Many game developers have expressed frustration by the limitation of game console hardware, and the lack of support tools for third party developers. Beyond the technical restrictions of having to fit a game on one of three major consoles, from a content standpoint, a game developer is restricted by the fact that no current major console maker will allow an Adults Only rated game to be published for use on their console.

While this system, restrictive for both game makers and game players, is still in place today, recent developments have given more flexibility to videogame developers in terms of the types of games they make and the method of their distribution. First, propelled by market demands and the ubiquity of broadband Internet access among the gaming population, each of the three major console makers have now developed alternative distribution models for videogame publishers. The current generation of videogame hardware is advanced exponentially in terms of processing power, memory, and interface. Whereas the first videogame consoles had simple wired controllers attached to a console which played only one, graphically crude game, current consoles have an array of wireless control devices, some of them complicated and with many buttons, others like the Nintendo Wii's controller, a simplified motion sensor controller shaped like a television remote control that connect to hardware capable of near-photorealism, and surround sound audio.

Yet, today, videogame makers need not feel compelled to make their games to fit the price point of a major videogame release (\$50-\$60), and the expectations that players have when paying that much for a game on a particular console. Each of the major console makers have developed online stores which allow for the distribution of both older videogames, and brand new properties that are graphically simpler at a lower price point. These games are much cheaper to develop, and allow many developers to take risks that they would not take if they were spending tens of millions of dollars in production and distribution. From a videogame narrative perspective, this has allowed for the distribution of many excellent story-driven games from previous console generations to whole new audiences. Services such as Microsoft Xbox's Live Arcade, Sony's Online Playstation Store, and Nintendo's WiiWare will also allow for the

development of new, innovative videogame narratives previously unimagined, or untried for fear of a multimillion dollar flop.

The first inklings of this have already occurred with the release of games like the WiiWare title *LostWinds* (2008). *LostWinds* is a short, simple, but beautiful game about harnessing the power of the wind with a Wii remote. The player takes on the role of Toku, an inhabitant of the island Mistalis, who, with the aide of a wind spirit named Enril, must save his island village from the evil Balasar (Figure 6-2). While *LostWinds* embodies a simple story, it represents a new development and distribution model for videogame narratives that should allow for the diversification of videogame narratives in the future. At only \$10, *LostWinds* is a videogame narrative equivalent of a short story; it takes only about 3 hours to play through the game as opposed to the dozens of hours it typical takes to play though fully priced releases.

LostWinds represents but one of many possible new directions videogames can take because of the greater variations that now exist in terms of videogame creation and distribution. However, another shift is occurring in videogame production that has the potential for far greater ramifications for videogame narratives. This shift is occurring in response to what Henry Jenkins calls *participatory culture*—“culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content” (290). This cultural shift has been driven by the increased control audiences have come to expect in the digital age. While videogames have always allowed a level of participation that other narrative media seldom do, increasingly, avid fans of videogames desire to be given creation tools that allow them to extend the play possibilities of games they have enjoyed playing.

A tremendous amount of academic writing about new media focuses on issues of the changing relationships between content creators and consumers. Many think these changes are

for the better—an egalitarian evolution towards a more creative, globally connected community. Others think these changes are cluttering an already overpopulated landscape of art, entertainment, and information. But whether this new wave of content and collaboration is a positive overflow of creativity and options, or an overwhelming flood of uselessness, there is no disputing that the tides are changing. The Internet especially has disrupted the pre-existing institutions of production, distribution and consumption. Billions of web pages created by millions of computer users fill the Web with new information, art, and entertainment. It seems as though just about everyone with the means and a method is sharing something with someone. This desire to not just consume but to create and share new content is now finding expression in videogames.

Videogame developers have increasingly attempted to tap into this desire by developing content creation tools that make it easier for videogame fans to make new content within a given game world. For years, PC gamers have been creating modifications (Mods) of existing, commercially released videogames to create new gaming experiences that build on the game engines or even the game world created by others. However, for the most part, these modifications have been made by savvy players capable of changing the programming of a game at the level of code. This limited the number of people who could translate the ideas they had to the videogame medium, and very few programmers capable of creating good Mods were also capable or inclined to create compelling narrative content.⁵

⁵ This does not mean, however, that these modifications were not excellent games. In fact, some of them have become just as popular as the games they modified. A prime example of this is the popular modification, *Counter-Strike* (1999), of the popular game, *Half-Life* (1998). *Counter-Strike* is so popular, in fact, that to this day, over seven years after its initial release, it is still one of the most widely played first person shooter games online (Steam).

This is changing, however, as is evidenced from the soon to be released Playstation Store game *Little Big Planet* (2008), which is already available as a free demo. It promises players the ability to create their own characters, objects, and levels. Furthermore, these creations can be shared with others, and the best designs created during the demonstration period, the developers say, may make it into the later, fuller commercial release of the game. So in this case, the original game makers are quite literally giving over authorial control to the players, so they in turn can become authors themselves. The promise of this game to provide easy opportunities to players to have the ability to create for themselves and others has made the pre-release hype for this game extremely high. The developers have tapped into the creative desires of huge numbers of gamers who have shown an interest in becoming game makers since the earliest stages of the medium's development. And if *Little Big Planet* turns out to be as successful as many anticipate, it is sure to lead to similar games, and possibly a greater shift toward player generated content (Figure 6-3).

It isn't just a matter of how much content is being created and who is creating it, however; it is the type of content that can be created that is also changing with these new, easier to use development tools. As more and more people are getting access to easier to use videogame development software, the videogame has begun to see the rebirth of the auteur. With much of the technical work already done or simplified, it is once again possible for a small group of individuals or even just one person to make graphically simple, but potentially complex and compelling videogame narratives that are easily distributed on the Internet using relatively simple creation software such as versions of Adobe's multifunctional *Flash* program, or specifically designed software such as versions of RPG Maker, which includes basic templates

for graphics, sounds, and interface as well as easy ways to create new graphic, sound, and game play elements.

One of the most controversial videogame narratives born of this new era of auteur created content is *Super Columbine Massacre RPG* (2005). *Super Columbine Massacre RPG* (SCMRPG) was created with RPG Maker 2000 in 2005 by a Colorado native and self-proclaimed loner who was bullied while he was in high school, Danny LeDonne. In this videogame, the player can take on the role of mass murderers Eric Harris or Dylan Klebold as they plan and execute the murders at Columbine High School (Figure 6-4). The game, which is disturbingly similar to console RPGs of the SNES such as *Final Fantasy VI*, uses sprite-based graphics from that era and low quality MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) versions of popular grunge and alternative music from the 1990s such as songs by Nirvana, Radiohead, and Smashing Pumpkins as a sound track. The game also includes digitized photographs from Columbine High School, including pictures of the dead bodies of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold as they were found in the school's library. The game does not end with their death, however, but continues as they travel to hell and meet an odd assortment of real and fictitious, living and dead characters. Some of these characters are from popular videogame narratives—characters such as Pikachu, Mario, and Megaman are all avatars from games the killers may have played growing up. Other characters were people, living or dead who may have influenced Harris or Klebold, or who represented the time of the killings. In hell, the player meets people such as John Lennon who is playing his song “Imagine” and Friedrich Nietzsche who accepts a copy of *Ecce Homo* from the player and praises *Nine Inch Nails*' Trent Reznor for his proclamations that “God is Dead.” While these people were dead when the massacre occurred, the player also meets others such as Ronald Reagan who were still alive when the Columbine massacre occurred. In the final

battle of the game, after the player as one of these real life killers has enacted the real life horrors, which for so long have been linked to videogame violence, the player battles Satan himself in the form of the cartoon Satan from the animated show *South Park*, and when Satan is defeated, he promises the killers freedom from hell if the player collects the two pieces of the Satanic Bible and brings them both back to him. Once this is accomplished, they are finally rewarded by Satan with a flying dragon on which they fly out of hell.

It is not surprising that this game was met with an avalanche of passionate criticism. It is one of the most controversial videogames ever made, and it is the only game to be nominated and then dismissed for consideration for an award at the independent game festival Slamdance (it was removed despite tremendous support from other independent developers involved with Slamdance). When news of the game hit the mainstream media outlets, it was reported on with horror and media critics critiqued its production with contemptuous outrage and disgust. Yet this contempt was not universally felt, and some people even praised the game. When noted videogame scholar and Georgia Tech professor Ian Bogost discussed the game on the online forum Water Cooler Games, he said this:

While it is a challenging subject, I think the effort is brave, sophisticated, and worthy of praise from those of us interested in videogames with an agenda. The purpose of this game is not to celebrate the events at Columbine, but to attempt to represent them from the perspective of the perpetrators. This is a worthwhile effort, and one truly unique to videogames as a medium.

Because of this and other statements about the game, some have called for Bogost's dismissal from Georgia Tech. Such was the fury over the game. However, unlike other similarly themed controversial games that followed *SCMRPG* such as the less thoughtful and more crass game based on the Virginia Tech massacre, *V-Tech Rampage*, many who have actually played *SCMRPG* have found it both disturbing and compelling. Some say the game is both a

commentary on the horrible event itself, and the society in which it occurred. Others claim that it is a grim satire of traditional game conventions that makes players think of videogames in a disturbing, more serious light. But perhaps the most telling opinion of the game is one by a survivor of the massacre who decided to overcome his initial surprise that someone would make a game based on the events he lived through to actually play the game (something that most of the critics of the game have not done).

Richard Castaldo, a student paralyzed from the chest down after being shot repeatedly by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold has this to say about playing the game in an interview with popular videogame blog Kotaku:

It probably sounds a bit odd for someone like me to say, but I appreciate the fact at least to some degree that something like this was made. I think that at least it gets people talking about Columbine in a unique perspective, which is probably a good thing.

Castaldo's ultimate assessment of the game is mixed, noting that the game was both thought-provoking and informative, but also deeply disturbing to play. Castaldo is not alone in this assessment, and *SCMRPG* has remained as one of the more discussed and argued about videogame narratives ever made, not just because of its disturbing subject matter (the Internet and easy development tools have led to a variety of equally disturbing games, many of which with political, religious, or ideological agendas), but because of the care with which it was made, and the artistry with which its deeply unsettling story is enacted by players.

Ultimately, whether someone finds *SCMRPG* or one of the other independently created videogame narratives being produced today now that production tools have allowed more people to express narrative content in the medium of the videogame praise or scorn worthy is beside the point that has been central to this dissertation from the start. What videogames like *SCMRPG*, and in a more mainstream and less controversial sense, *Little Big Planet*, indicate is that the

stories that can be enacted in the medium of the videogame are becoming more varied and in some cases more profound as development tools become more accessible. This fact coupled with the ease with which new content can be cheaply and easily distributed on the Internet is leading to a proliferation of new videogame narratives. As a medium, videogames have come a long way, and videogame narratives have evolved significantly over the last couple of decades. However, if recent history is any indication, we have only begun to tap the potential of the videogame as a narrative medium, and there is no telling what sort of stories we will be playing tomorrow.



Figure 6-1. Riddick is using a NanoMed Health Unit to replenish his health. The strategic placement of health replenishing devices is a common convention of action games, so this device carries an affordance of usage even if players did not read the player manual instructing them on its proper usage.



Figure 6-2. Toku seeks help in his efforts to defeat the evil Balasar in *LostWinds* (2008).



Figure 6-3. In *Little Big Planet* (2008) players are given the tools to create their own game world and populate it with “Rag Doll” characters that the players themselves can design.



Figure 6-4. In *Super Columbine Massacre RPG* (2005), there is a disturbing disconnect between the thoughts expressed by the character Eric Harris and the thoughts of most players.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sean Fenty was born in Miami, Florida, in 1977, and lived in Florida until the summer of 2007 when he moved, with his wife Nicole, to Louisville, Kentucky. He received his B.A. in English and religious studies from the University of South Florida in 2000, and his Masters of Arts degree in English from the University of Florida in 2002. He is currently a fulltime instructor at the University of Louisville. Starting in 2009, he will become the Dual-Credit Coordinator of Composition classes at the University of Louisville. In his spare time, he enjoys hiking, biking, and lounging around with Nicole and their dog, Blake.