Immersion, Roleplaying, Narrative Design: Concepts for Understanding Videogame Narrative

by

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Author's Declaration

This thesis consists of material all of which I authored or co-authored: see Statement of Contributions included in the thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Statement of Contributions

Aleksander Franiczek is the sole author for all sections of the dissertation, excluding section 3.6. Aleksander is the lead author of section 3.6.

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As the first author of this manuscript, Aleksander Franiczek is responsible for 60% of the study design, data collection, and analysis, and 90% responsible for the writing process. The second author is responsible for the remaining 40% of the study design components and 10% of the writing.

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Abstract

Single-player videogames have been at the forefront of public and academic conversations about the supposed novelty of digital, interactive narratives for the past 30 years. This perceived novelty, together with the digital medium's capacity for remediating the aesthetics of prior popular media such as novels, film, performance, and of course games, has spurred conflicting discussions about its ontological and teleological nature. Whether one listens to game scholars, developers, or players, there is no single answer that encapsulates the wide range of disciplinary perspectives and personal fixations that make videogames interesting and meaningful. This project therefore synthesizes a range of research across disciplines to address a longstanding yet still insufficiently explored area of videogame inquiry: their historical creation, function, and consumption as a form of narrative.

This dissertation examines how narrative meaning in single-player videogames emerges in the interaction between the material, rhetorical, and formal properties of the game as well as the imaginative engagement and individual experience of a given player. In other words, it delves into how narrative has been conceived and discussed around games, how players cultivate and interpret their gameplay as a narrative experience, and how developers leverage the multimodal potential of videogames towards narrative-driven expression.

It does so through a synthesis of research around three interrelated key terms: immersion, role-playing, and narrative design. The terms *immersion* and *roleplaying* help explore how a player's involvement in the role of a digital avatar—established through the identity and affordances presented by the game's design and the player's creative engagement with those fixed elements—can offer a means for subject formation, self-reflection, and critical interpretation. This involves exploring these concepts' relations between narrative (Murray), digital technology (Coleman), and the self (Gee). The project then examines how this critical engagement textually stems from the player's experience of a game's *narrative design*: a game design concept and development practice related to the coherent integration of a game's processes, its representational content, and the thematic and subjective meanings players uncover through the narrative event of gameplay (Berger). This framework can help develop greater literacy of the unique ways in which a videogame's textual meaning is co-constructed between a game's procedurality, representations, creators, and players.

These topics are supported by case studies of games—predominantly role-playing games, or RPGs—that leverage the expressiveness of the medium towards innovations in digital, interactive storytelling. By situating these discussions of videogame narrative with texts that tackle videogames' unique media aesthetics (Calleja), indebtedness to prior media (Saler), black-boxed creation process (Švelch), genre in cross-cultural creative contexts (Hutchinson and Pelletier-Gagnon), historical marginalization and entanglements with queer (Ruberg) and femme (Chess) folks, and other relevant topics, this dissertation analyzes the ways that single-player videogames can offer narrative experiences that combine the aesthetic and technical in ways that recontextualize the self's involvement in fictional engagement.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation emerged from a lifelong fascination with the continually evolving medium of single-player videogames. It is a project born out of the passion to earnestly contribute to the ways we understand and discuss them and my own stubbornness to write about something I can't seem to turn away from. As a result, I must show enormous appreciation to everyone who remained on board to hear out my ideas and support them to the end.

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Introduction

This dissertation will examine how narrative meaning in single-player videogames emerges in the interaction between the material, rhetorical, and formal properties of the game and the subjective, imaginative engagement and individual experience of a given player. My goal is to unpack the narratological and media-specific connotations of longstanding concepts, such as player immersion and role-playing, and to define the textuality of narrative design as both co-constructed by developers across multiple, distinct creative roles, and encountered by players as they holistically interpret the audiovisual, haptic, performative, and linguistic elements that make up gameplay. The dissertation develops a theory and methodology for understanding the player experience of narrative in videogames and the role of narrative design in facilitating the meaning of that experience. In other words, the project aims to promote literacy for narrative design and related terms that helps players understand the intertwined and co-created textualities between how game developers cultivate meaning through design and how players derive meaning through gameplay. These are both creative processes that can and have been interpreted alone, but a stronger conception of narrative design and related theory demands a closer examination of their potential synergies and tensions.

Firstly, the dissertation will focalize the terms *immersion* and *roleplaying* to explore how the mix of a player's self-cultivated and procedurally enabled involvement in the role of a digital avatar can offer a means for subject formation, self-reflection, and critical engagement through a framework that explores these concepts' relations between narrative, digital technology, and the self. I will then carry this framework into a discussion of

narrative design—as a game development concept and practice—to understand the coherent integration of a game's processes, its representational content, and the thematic and personalized meanings players uncover through interpreting narrative design as both a designed object and the narrative event of gameplay. The research goal is to explore and synthesize key concepts related to the narrative meaning a player can parse from the objective analysis of a game's elements and design, and subjective analysis of their own gameplay experience.

The dissertation follows the integrated thesis model to synthesize a range of research mobilization efforts I undertook during the PhD to fulfill this goal. I found that sharing aspects of my dissertation research with a wider community through conference presentations and publications was a motivational and validating process. Through these experiences and the other scholars I met during them, I learned how to better situate my research constructively within and alongside past and current game studies scholarship. I came into the dissertation influenced by a wide range of research areas from my MA and the first two years of my PhD, including phenomenology, media studies, critical design, narrative theory, cultural studies, modern literature, poststructuralism, and psychoanalysis. As I read and engaged with texts from all these fields, I would inevitably consider their relevance to better understanding videogames. So, I gave into what I was clearly most invested in, immersed myself in game studies scholarship more fulsomely, and ended up with a game studies dissertation.

With its interdisciplinary basis and broad interest in games of all kinds, game studies can be an amorphous field with a vast possibility space. Due to the potential expansiveness of

its subject matter, a game studies scholar must be sure to avoid generalizing their ideas across too large a spectrum of games and experiences. Videogames can be fun escapism or intellectually engaging. A player can come to like them due to their gameplay, their audiovisual style, and/or their stories. Their design can be based around hyperactive action or uneventful contemplation. They can be purely multi-player, purely single-player, or a hybrid of both. Their budgets can range from a few thousand dollars to well over $100 million. For this reason, I must begin by specifying the scope of games and experiences I have focused on in my research.

Broadly speaking, my main case studies in this dissertation are single-player, digital role-playing games (SPDRPGs, or simply RPGs), a genre label I unpack and complicate in Section 2 of the dissertation through a grounding in Stenros and Sihvonen's conceptualization of the genre's unique aesthetics. Initially based on fantasy tabletop games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, digital RPGs tend to balance world-building and storytelling with character-driven systems and gameplay mechanics to form a gameplay loop that can cover 1-100+ hours of playtime. The RPGs I look at are all commercially released games and thus primarily entertainment products, although what I am most interested in examining is the ways they have pushed the medium forward narratively through creative innovations and iterations in narrative design, and how players derive meaning from their experience interacting both physically with that design and imaginatively with the game world. Whether considering modern triple-A games or indies, the bulk of SPDRPGs released today remain largely steeped in the formal genre conventions established and iterated on throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. One of the most significant trends of the last 15 years of game

development is a keener interest for developers to explore new avenues for narrative and aesthetic expression using those established design models. Even in the many cases where established genre principles continue to serve as the basis for game design in contemporary single-player games, the scope of experiences they offer through thoughtful iteration and implementation of narrative design can result in distinctly meaningful experiences for players.

The games I look at include foundational classics (e.g. *Dragon Quest IV, Final Fantasy IV*), subversive indie hits (*Undertale, Disco Elysium*, *Sable*), and some of the more creatively celebrated triple-A hits (*God of War* (2018), *NieR: Automata*, *Red Dead Redemption 2*)—all of which helped evolve or creatively pushed against the well-worn design conventions and aesthetics of RPGs. Videogames with compelling narrative design do not simply recycle design and aesthetics from other titles but engage creatively and/or critically with the conventions that countless of their peers are content to replicate. These are not 'serious games' created primarily for a social function outside of artistic intrigue and/or commercial entertainment (Laamarti et al.), but beyond providing the questionable telos of 'fun' (Soderman, Ruberg) push the conventions of genre, game mechanics, and aesthetics to expand the expressive potential of the medium instead of simply cashing in on the proven and popular. This introduction will draw on personal experience to offer context for what exactly I mean when I talk about "videogame narrative" (a historically complicated discourse), situate longstanding discussions of videogame narrative in a nuanced cultural context, and outline the content of the dissertation's three sections.

0.1 What Works and Doesn't Work about Videogame Narrative?

Ultimately, with how many types of videogames now exist, one's taste and interest in the medium can be entirely dependent on the player and what kind of experience they are looking for. Perhaps the best way I can contextualize the games I'm interested in, and why, is through explaining my history with them. So far, I've explained what brought me into this dissertation research intellectually, but I also see it as the culmination of a lifelong interest in videogames and fiction-based media more broadly. I first discovered my love of narrative media through videogames. I grew up as the youngest of three brothers, each four years apart, and was born into a house where videogames were regularly being played. The console I started with was the Super Nintendo (SNES), which featured a library of games—particularly JRPGs, or Japanese Role-Playing Games—that continues to be celebrated for pushing forward the medium's ability to tell compelling stories or at least offer an aesthetically compelling world where gameplay can feel like your own narrative experience. The games that most interested me did not only offer the simple ludic pleasures of a *Super Mario Bros.* or *Tetris*; they represented fleshed out worlds that through a combination of distinct audiovisual aesthetics and thoughtfully integrated gameplay systems offered a playground of narrative experience despite their relatively primitive resources.

Some of these games included the apocalyptic trauma narrative of *Final Fantasy VI*, the Japanese satire of America in *EarthBound*, the isolating and atmospheric sci-fi adventure *Super Metroid*, and the heroic epic of *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. When I discuss these games in terms of the "narrative experience" they offer I am talking about more than

the story content (in the sense of the Russian Formalists' *fabula*) or the in-game character interactions; I mean the more subjective narrative construction and meaning that emerges from a synthesized engagement of sounds, visuals, user interface, systems, mechanics, gameplay loops, unique moments, and whatever else the game offers as part of its multimodal presentation. It's videogames as an "all-at-once" embodied media experience (Keogh, Introduction) through which a narrative (in the sense of the Russian Formalists' *sjuzhet*) is actualized and interpreted by a specific player (Tomashevsky 68).

The pleasure of videogames was never primarily about mastery to me. In this way, I always identified more with the cyborg-player identity Keogh defines in opposition to the culturally normative hacker-gamer (ch. 6). As a child, I loved playing videogames but would rarely fuss about beating them. More than anything I enjoyed imaginatively engaging with the evocative, stylized worlds and hanging out with the colourful characters these games depicted. I remember hours spent just running around as Link in *Ocarina of Time's* opening zone, the peaceful and forested Kokiri Village, where all the characters were perpetual fairy-children ignorant to and uninterested in the greater world outside. Instead of pursuing the main objective that would push me into dangerous and (at the time) intimidating circumstances, I would linger and interact with Kokiri Village's residents as I imagined detailed histories and relationships between them and Link. The narrative of the game for me took shape as something barely represented in the game itself, yet stemming from what it presented to me. This probably sounds akin to fan fiction, and yet it's different. Fan fiction is the creation of a secondary text informed by and peripheral to a source. This imaginative

roleplaying, on the other hand, became a fundamental part of my narrative experience of the primary text, *Ocarina of Time*—emerging naturally from the interaction between myself (the player) and the game. As Keogh argues, "the videogame-as-played *is* the videogame-as-narrativized" (ch. 5). Little did I know I was engaging in a critical practice that Flanagan calls "rewriting" (36), a term that feels wholly appropriate considering how it positions the player as a creator working with established material. Rewriting is both a subversive approach to gameplay and a creative narrative practice, and is intertwined with the imaginative engagement of role-playing.

This is, of course, an extreme example based on a child's hyperactive imagination, but I hope it helps understand the extent to which a game's narrative meaning is generated from its player's embodied and imaginative interaction with what the game presents to them. Out of my gameplay formed a version of Link who deferred beginning his quest out of hesitancy and fear of his call to heroic action. It was a Link whose history and depth of feeling towards Kokiri Village and its distinct inhabitants existed beyond, yet was formed by, what was represented on screen. The game offered this narrative material whether it intended to or not. Had the designers and writers not bothered to give each Kokiri citizen a distinct look and personality, my childhood self would likely not feel as compelled to colour them with deeper meanings. Were Kokiri Village as a virtual environment not designed as a playground for testing out the game's (at the time) revolutionary 3D movement mechanics, I would have had little reason to linger there and imaginatively/mechanically play with the space for as long as I did. Importantly, my interest in playing with the mechanics led to the time to imaginatively

engage with the world. Game design and storytelling are inevitably intertwined in the player's experience of the game as a holistic experience, whether the effects are intended or not.

This natural co-determination of narrative and play as it is experienced and imparted with meaning by the player is the foundation of narrative design's latent and manifest textuality. Indeed, parts of Freud's theory on *The Interpretation of Dreams* read as if they could have been written about videogames, in which he notably distinguishes dreams' face-value experience (manifest content) from the buried significance derived from the more focused narrativization by the dreamer (latent content). He argues that the elements which seem nonsensical or contradictory in dreams can be methodically interpreted to extract meaning: "'No' seems not to exist so far as dreams are concerned. They show a particular preference for combining contraries into a unity or for representing them as one and the same thing" (798). If the manifest content of videogames is gameplay itself, which observed on its own can often appear thematically incoherent or tangential of anything conventionally meaningful, the latent content is how this gameplay is informed by the co-creative process of interaction and interpretation. What is denoted in the manifest content is a 'text' under which lies the connoted subtext of the latent content. In my studies on player immersion and narrative design, I am interested in dissecting how videogames' latent content (as created by the player) stems from the design decisions that produce its manifest content (as provided by the developers). This necessitates a valorization of subjectivity as shaped by the objective elements that set the grounds for a player's gameplay experience.

Despite this rich potential for multimodal meaning, a prominent part of most gameplay experiences is an apparent dissonance between gameplay and narrative. As someone who studied literature and literary theory as the focus of my BA and MA, and have also appreciated hundreds of acclaimed movies, I recognize that videogames are not the most effective medium for storytelling—at least not in terms of pacing out and presenting dramatic plot points or developing complex character interiority. No matter how compelling a videogame's plot or characters might be, the narrative disconnect between the repeating loop of gameplay and explicit story material such as text or cutscenes is always obvious enough for any cynic of the medium to easily critique. In the academic world, this made videogames (especially at the turn of the millennium) an easy target during game studies' infamous culture war between the idealist narratologists and the seemingly more realist ludologists. The disconnect between these two polarities is also apparent in non-academic games discourse, where certain players or developers might consider themselves "story" people or "mechanics" people based on whether their primary interest in games is in their ability to craft narrative experiences versus just enjoying the way it feels to play them (Durham 7). At the same time, these preferences hold historically gendered associations that have long been embedded in games culture. People who play primarily for story or simple relaxation have been labelled as "casuals" (a weaker, feminized player) while those who appreciate difficulty and the absorbing activities of core gameplay are "hardcore" Gamers (a more legitimized, masculine player) (Vanderhoef). I will further explore this connection between an interest in game narrative and a socially constructed femininity in the next section.

Popular videogame discourse is no stranger to videogames' storytelling shortcomings, either. The ever-present tension between a videogame's gameplay and story has been referred to as *ludonarrative dissonance*, "a powerful dissonance between what [a game] is about as a game, and what it is about as a story" (Hocking). The term first appeared in a 2007 blog post by game designer Clint Hocking and became widely debated by videogame creators and journalists for years to come. The popularity of the term invited critique of videogames that failed to make their ludic and narrative elements cohere thematically, such as the apparent disparity between *Bioshock's* story elements that are supposed to offer a critique of Randian, objectivist self-interest versus the promotion of self-interest in its gameplay options (something difficult to avoid for a first-person shooter) and the fatalistic lack of agency the player is stuck with (Hocking). Yet, simply judging a game by whether it commits this supposed fallacy fails to address how videogames consistently struggle with seamlessly blending story and gameplay, are uninterested in doing so, or can deliberately fail at doing so for subversive thematic effect. Even a carefully designed narrative-driven game will inevitably cause some degree of ludonarrative dissonance due to the authorial control that player interactivity wrests from the game's creators. Even games that generally trade off complex game mechanics and challenges for subtle interactivity and focused narrative-heavy gameplay—such as those that fall under the *walking simulator* genre— must still deal with the potential for an uncooperative or confused player to botch the direction or pace that the designers intended. By no fault of their own, the player is a constant threat to the impossible aesthetic ideal of a genuinely interactive virtual narrative experience. This does not mean that games cannot offer a compelling narrative that can affect their players. It means that the

significance of the narrative experience games can offer depend on the effort and care of the individual player. A player must "actively create belief" to establish their own investment in the gameplay experience (Murray), and from there the meaning of that experience comes as much from the *alterbiography*, "the story generated by the individual player as she takes action in the game," as the *scripted narrative*, "referring to the pre-scripted story events written into the game" (Calleja 115). As such, a discussion about ludonarrative dissonance should not be limited to a question of, "does the game have it?" but rather, how do players actively overcome it to maintain their sense of immersion?

With this context in mind, the dissertation draws on decades of playing videogames and engaging with games discourse to ground my ideas in a way that I hope academics, professionals, and critics alike can understand and engage with. Towards this end, I ground my writing through terms that should be recognizable to academics, journalists, and developers alike and complicate their different usages across these spheres. As a personal project, this dissertation is an attempt to understand why I keep gravitating back towards games for narrative experience despite fully recognizing the insufficiencies of the medium. I already outlined my academic research questions, but this work has been informed by another set of research questions stemming from an attempt to understand my investment in the medium. What do they offer that other storytelling media cannot? And what have I (and others who have devoted much of their time) got out of the fictional engagement they offer?

0.2 Videogame Narrative vs Gamers

As much as this research is grounded in a personal investment in its subject matter, I must account for the limitations of my positionality and understand the larger societal context embedded in this work. In the continuous wake of GamerGate and supremacy of white, male, cisgender players in videogame culture at large, it bears recognizing my own positionality in this culture as I write about players, subjectivity, and game narrative. I am, in terms of all these identity markers, the normative, privileged, and catered to Gamer. Feminist game studies scholars have defined the capital-G Gamer as a cultural identity marker usually associated with a heteronormative, male subject defined communally by having completed many games, knowledge of developers, shared inside jokes, and appreciation of challenging gameplay (Shaw "On Not"). What turns the Gamer into a problematic identity marker is its historically gendered association, as popular game magazines from the late 1980s and throughout the 90s used misogynistic and homophobic marketing to lock in a devoted young male fanbase (Vossen 11-12). Growing up in a household with two older brothers who played videogames, I have played games for as long as I could understand how to use a controller. At the same time, I never identified much with Gamer culture as it existed on the internet.

Before I even had the vocabulary for understanding such concepts, I was turned off by the gatekeeping and toxic masculinity found in player discussions on the majority of popular forums for major games criticism websites such as *GameSpot* and *IGN*. Contrary to these Gamers' fetishization of 'objective' measures for understanding a game's quality, for me the

allure of videogames came largely from the aesthetic and narrative aspects—the visuals, sounds, and characters that made up a game world—while the 'hardcore' appreciation of deep game systems and challenging mechanics was more a way to sustain interest across hours of playtime than the medium's selling point. From here I developed an appreciation of narrative design and pursued this research as a way of focalizing the more abstract, thematic expressiveness of games. As an attempt to mitigate blindspots and biases that can stem from my identity, I strive to align myself with the work of feminist and queer game studies—through the work of scholars such as Bo Ruberg, Shira Chess, and Sarah Stang—who make a point to dig beyond the masculine fixation on fun and mastery in games to celebrate the value of friction and subversion of player expectations that can make gameplay intellectually compelling and subjectively revealing. With that said, I must remain cognisant that the majority of videogames cater to my identity and I may not experience the same frictions with the representations and mechanics in these games as players from marginalized positions. What I argue about their influence and significance is therefore limited to my perspective as someone who is part of the normative Gamer identity yet working against its discursive influence.

On the first day of the game studies course I taught several times during my PhD (ENGL 294), I asked my students what most appeals to them about the videogame medium. A sense of achievement and social interaction were two common answers, but a surprising amount of students specified music, art, story, or characters rather than anything to do with gameplay in a vacuum. A discourse that privileges the systems-driven, procedural meanings of

videogames over the presentation and incorporation of these supposedly tangential elements divorces them from the reality of what many players (often marginalized, less traditionally masculine ones) seek from them in the first place. According to Bogost, "image [i.e. representation] is subordinate to process" for videogame expression (124). He demonstrates as much in his famous reading of *Animal Crossing* as "a game about the repetition of mundane work necessary to support contemporary material property ideals… by creating a model of commerce and debt in which the player can experience and discover such consequences" (Bogost 119). It is an astute interpretation that kickstarted a revolutionary formalism for game studies towards reading games for their *procedural rhetoric*: the interpretation of their digitally regulated processes.

However, it also overlooks the ways this meaning can shift upon considering the games' other multimodal elements and the experiences players can have with it. How does the playfully sardonic writing of *Animal Crossing's* NPCs, the calming ambient music that adapts to the hour of the day, the multiplayer functionality, or the inclusion of more altruistic interactions between player and characters complicate this reading? How does the meaning in later iterations shift as the player's role changes—going from a simple village inhabitant in the original *Animal Crossing* to a micro-managing mayor in *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*? As digital artefacts, procedurality is always an important consideration in understanding a videogame's meaning, but to paint it as the primary way they hold meaning is an unnecessary claim that holds false for the partialities of individual players and the full scope of materiality that constitutes videogames and gameplay. This dissertation seeks to further legitimize these

often-downplayed preferences and desires, and situate them in research about the creation and reception of videogames—including narrative design in particular—as texts.

Toxic masculine gatekeeping, or what Emma Vossen calls *cultural inaccessibility*, has been at the origin of not only popular games journalism/criticism, but the academic field of game studies as well (15). Some of the most revered and cited game studies scholars, including Bogost and others with a primarily ludological interest in games, have tried to draw hard lines on what can or should be *legitimately* meaningful or expressive about videogames—which usually privileges the meanings derived from videogames' rules and processes over less technical and more traditionally artistic aspects. This is directly problematized in Batti and Karabinus' web article, "A Dream of Embodied Experience: On Ian Bogost, Epistemological Gatekeeping, and the Holodeck," a feminist response to an article in *The Atlantic* from Bogost provocatively titled "Video Games are Better Without Stories." The authors point out that the strength of videogame narratives is not their ability to tell a cohesive story, but in the embodied difference in "the potential to be present at [a] narrative juncture" and the "active engagement, movement and consideration" that goes into immersing oneself in its world (Batti and Karabinus). Contrary to techno-fetishistic virtual reality discourse that paints immersion as an effortless transition enabled by high fidelity graphics and seamless interfacing (Blackman 408), narrative-based understandings of immersion (from pioneering scholars labelled 'narratologists' like Janet Murray and Marie-Laure Ryan) emphasize the active role of players in cultivating their own immersion. This notion is not exclusive to games either—it is foundational to reader-response theory that

understands how, even with literary works, the meaning of the *text itself* is always filtered through the experiences and subjective associations of the reader (Iser, *Act of Reading* 21). This is what I mean when I explore the notion of immersion as desire in Section 1, my conceptualization of roleplaying as a creative gameplay practice in Section 2, or my framing of the textuality of narrative design as co-constructed by developers and players in Section 3.

I may not have been made to feel the cultural inaccessibility of games first-hand, but I see and continue to learn how videogame culture has been deprived of a more complete and accurate understanding of games and players as a consequence of its exclusionary and silencing power. Thankfully, game studies and the game industry has begun to remedy this over the past decade with a much higher presence of scholars, developers, and journalists who are women, queer people, and people of colour. Although I do not presume that my research is explicitly activist in its slant, I have benefitted from the valuable insights of scholars from marginalized communities and aim to uphold the discursive momentum they set forward with how I have attempted to progress and subvert prevalent discourse surrounding videogame narrative. Following such scholarship's productive embrace of embodied subjectivity, I have also rooted these ideas earnestly in my own experiences as a videogame enthusiast whose preferences have often diverged from popular, supposedly objective consensus. Part of my reasoning for selecting case studies that are part of the normative videogame canon is to complicate their appeal through the theoretical grounding of my secondary sources—many of which are feminist, queer, subjectively contextual, and anti-consumerist. I follow Ruberg's idea of *queer play* as "a way of being, doing, and

desiring *differently*" to reframe and transform the ways existing canonical games are played and interpreted (7). I acknowledge that my positionality cannot offer the unique observations and readings players from marginalized communities bring to the field; nevertheless, the work of these scholars provides a valuable means for any games researcher to push against problematic racially and gendered norms that continue to prevail over discussions of *what* and *how* videogames can hold meaning for their players.

I avoid using the term *gamer* throughout the dissertation outside of the context of its discursive connection to GamerGate and the ideologically charged identity attached to the movement. Instead, I default to *player* as a more neutral term for discussing the subjects of individual and collective gameplay experiences. However, even the generalized use of 'player' is questionable considering the ways that players who do not fit into the 'gamer' mold have been marginalized for their identities, preferences, and/or experiences—which scholars like Kishonna Gray explore the nuances of through an intersectional and ethnographic lens. Whenever I use the word 'player,' then, it is in reference to a subject both general and fundamentally individual. Players are joined as subjects who co-create gameplay by interacting with videogame hardware. Yet, as Calleja's concept of alterbiography and feminist close reading both suggest, the materiality and meaning of this gameplay cannot be divorced from the person who enacted it. The feelings of desire and friction that occur for an individual player during and outside gameplay is therefore essential to the concept of the player as such. At the core of this project is an understanding that the unique identities and experiences of a players shape engagement with and interpretations of gameplay.

0.3 Outline

The dissertation is organized into sections that sequentially focus on three interrelated key terms: Section 1 looks at *immersion*; Section 2 looks at *roleplaying*; and Section 3 looks at *narrative design*. While I unpack each term extensively in its respective section through academic and popular usage and contexts, I want to first speak towards how I see their interconnectivity here. Sure enough, none of these concepts and the respective experiences they coincide with are necessary to the ideation or enjoyment of a videogame. A player does not need to be immersed—in the literal sense of feeling submerged in a virtual reality (Murray 125)—to enjoy the designed interactions that make up gameplay. A player does not need to roleplay—in the sense of earnestly projecting "as if" they are the fictional character they play as (Bowman 196)—to feel invested in a game's story. And the thematic connectivity between gameplay and story inherent to the practice of narrative design (Breault 1) is not a necessary part of game design. The breakout and continued success of ludically focused arcade-like games from 1985's *Tetris* to more recent hits like 2022's *Vampire Survivors* and 2024's *Balatro* prove that videogames need no pretense of story or fictional intrigue to provide the dopamine hits and flow-inducing momentum that good game design is so effective at facilitating. Importantly, the same could not be said for novels or film. Even if the appeal of a novel or film is more in experimental prose or technical camerawork than their story, a narrative (however sparse) is still necessary to ground that technique with purpose and expression. With videogames, the critical interpretation of narratively engaging elements is a "secondary pursuit" that expands the game's capacity for meaning (Soderman 150). However, this extraneous aspect of game narrative is part of what makes it a

compelling subject of study. To understand its value—as is my goal in this dissertation—requires getting to the heart of what players and developers desire from the medium, and the creative efforts they take to wrest meaning from these virtual experiences.

Section 1 untangles and reforms the concept of player *immersion* from its web of digital and non-digital, as well as formal and subjective associations by unpacking the discourse surrounding the immersive ideal. I discuss immersion's many varied and paradoxical definitions when applied in various media and commercial contexts to understand it as both a longstanding mode of fictional engagement and for its novel association with digital media. The section revisits Janet Murray's original theoretical conception of digital game immersion as a fundamentally narrative phenomenon and places it in conversation with broader definitions of the term used in relation to other digital and non-digital media, as well as its techno-fetishistic use in videogame marketing. I discuss the dual connotation of immersion as a technical and imaginary phenomenon by looking at how the latter was constructed in the marketing of Infocom's early text adventures, and how the former had taken precedence once publishers had to continually sell new videogame consoles. By combining these discourses, I position Murray's vision as a feminist antidote pointing towards immersion's capacity for fictionally derived subjective interpretation of a text. Using two case studies (*Undertale* and *Disco Elysium*) known more for their narrative design innovations rather than technical achievements, the chapter explores the paradox of the term immersion as a desired affect that is central to understanding the relation between a player's connection to a game world and their avatar. The section concludes with a research-creation project that creatively misuses

gameplay capturing technology to pivot from its performative and commercial usage on platforms like Twitch towards a reflective practice resulting from the player's immersion and their role-playing as an avatar. Much of this material has been developed out of conference presentations or published in the middle-state journal *First Person Scholar*.

Section 2 turns to the concept of *role-playing* as one way to understand how the immersive desire takes shape during gameplay by presenting a theory about the player/avatar connection's potential for self-reflection, and analysis of how this connection is facilitated (or obstructed) by both developers and players. Through a historical design analysis of role-playing affordances in both Western and Japanese role-playing games (RPGs), as well as a netnographical analysis of player reflections on role-playing different avatars, the chapter presents avatar characterization as a fundamental tool for understanding how developer-driven and player-driven meanings emerge concurrently between these two co-creators of the narrative of gameplay. These topics are covered across three peer-reviewed publications that comprise the section: "Solitary Role-Playing and Self-Reflection: RPG as Creative Playstyle" is a published book chapter in the *Epistemic Genres: New Formations of Play* collection; "Role-playing Affordances and Aesthetics in Japanese and Western RPGs: Towards a Typology of Videogame Avatars" is a published article in the Replaying Japan Journal; and "Gaming vs Roleplaying: How Trophies Impact the Aesthetic Experience of Videogames" is a book chapter accepted in the upcoming *Trophy Cases* collection.

Section 3 discusses *narrative design*, applying the theories developed in the previous two chapters to a concrete development practice whose purpose is to make the many multimodal

aspects of a videogame thematically coherent and narratively involving via designed interaction. Narrative design is a text guided by a creative vision molded through different individual and collective skillsets and interests. The section will engage with narrative design through related discussions on videogame textuality, interpretation, authorship, research-creation, and a mixed-methods case study analysis to reveal new insights about how developers conceptually imbue gameplay with narrative meaning and how players co-create this meaning through their interactions and interpretations. The section includes a peer-reviewed conference paper, "On the Making of *Prometheus: A Discourse Reflection Game for Engineers*," that was accepted to *IEEE ETHICS-2023*, and "Iterating Identity: Mixed-Methods Analysis of the Creative Process Developing *Dragon Quest I-VI*," which is undergoing review at *Games: Research and Practice*. Otherwise, the section is built from material that was presented in two iterations of the Canadian Game Studies Association (CGSA) conference.

I have sequenced these sections in the order that their respective key terms—immersion, roleplaying, and narrative design—became a focal point of my research. I began focused on immersion as a phenomenological experience tied to the promise of immediacy by digital media, considering its mediation of the self and world by virtual selves and environments that open up a capacity for reflection upon returning to the actual world. I then turned to roleplaying as a creative practice that reveals the multiplicity of the self through earnest, imaginative engagement, focusing on the term's underdeveloped application to videogames in comparison to tabletop games and live-action roleplay. It then became apparent that both

these player-based phenomena are tied to the practice of narrative design, which I develop a deeper theoretical grasp on through considering what insights it can reveal about videogame interpretation, textuality, and authorship. With a focus on these terms' history and interconnectedness, the dissertation explores theoretical principles, material development practices, and creative player engagements that constitute the expression of narrative meaning in videogames. The research explores the following questions: what are we actually talking about when we talk about game 'narrative'? What are the aspirations and practices players bring forward to engage with games narratively? What are the approaches developers take to making their games' fiction involving and their gameplay meaningful? What are the narrative traditions and frameworks that videogames, as a multimodal digital medium, adopt and remediate from other expressive artforms? What aspects of videogame narrative—if any—are wholly unique? By answering these questions, the analysis will define and unify developer and player literacies towards understanding videogames as narrative media and the meanings they can carry and impart.

I mentioned above how videogames do not require the practices and experiences associated with my key terms to function as videogames, but their disregard reduces the potential of what the medium can offer and its larger cultural impacts on consumers. Not all videogames are content to distill the medium to such ludic essences. Many have loftier—if not always successful—goals that extend the definition of immersion from a flow-like state to other types of player involvement derived from the medium's multimodal capabilities. Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow is a foundational concept to game studies and

gamification that has been used to promote the idea that the primary way in which games are 'meaningful' is as tools for feeling personal growth and achievement within a playful context (Soderman 5-6). This corporately idealized context for play either offers a sense of reprieve and refreshment from the stress of the real world in a self-contained "magic circle" environment (Huizinga 11) or is integrated into work culture through merit points and other systems for rewarding productivity and efficiency. In either case, the design of game (or gamified) systems is meant to positively motivate more work, prioritizing a perpetual sense of self-fulfillment through action over critical reflection (Soderman 31). Soderman notes how "One of the defining principles of the flow experience concerns the loss of self-consciousness" yet, when it returns, "it returns with gifts—a surplus value of higher-level skills and capabilities that supposedly augment and enlarge the self, bestowing on it a higher complexity" (45). A return from immersive roleplaying, on the other hand, might lead to a questioning of the self that the player returns to—a self that has been altered through the act of play. This is less about nourishing and expanding a stable self than offering an opportunity for understanding that self's malleability and the multiple 'virtual' selves a subject operates through.

Chapter 1
Player Immersion as Narrative Phenomenon and Paradoxical Desire

1.1 Introduction

The first section of this dissertation focuses on immersion in the context of videogames, and videogame narrative more particularly. In the 45 years since consumers began to frequent arcades and purchase videogames for their home devices, and 30 years since game studies (and particularly digital game studies) began to emerge as its own scholarly field, the word immersion has been used to signify everything from narrative involvement (Ryan, "From Narrative Games" 54), the spectacular technical effects of new hardware and graphical power (Murray 139), and the absorbing state of ludic activity (Calleja 22). It appears often in early games scholarship and game industry marketing to sell audiences on the idea that there is something special about the experiences digital games offer and the way players interact with them. As established within game studies by Janet Murray in her foundational and optimistic *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, immersion has come to represent what players desire from the unique experience videogames offer as an entertainment medium. In sum, immersion represents all the desires that players have wanted videogames to fulfill—whether that be a more actively involved mode of experiencing fictional narratives, to be sensorially wowed by the growing capabilities of computer technology and graphics, or as an avenue for escapism and self-fulfillment by opting into activities and goals purely for the enjoyment of it. With that said, Murray's book's subtitle, *The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, is telling. For Murray and much of the discourse that her book influenced—that is, humanities-adjacent

game studies—the connotations with the word immersion that I referenced above all ideally serve an aesthetic function that promises a new frontier for experiencing fictional narratives. Through this historical theoretical lens, immersion is the key word for considering videogames as compelling fiction-based media.

Immersion has been so broadly applied, or "over-inclusive," across these different definitions to the point of losing a consistent meaning (Michailidis et al. 3). In this section, I argue that immersion continues to be a widely used and unavoidable term because it represents a desire to understand and appreciate what makes the fictional experiences videogames offer unique. My intent is to parse that idea by looking at the history of immerison's usage, its contradictory significations, and theories around the effects of the experience it supposedly offers players. Before that, I want to further specify what the word immersion tends to signify by contrasting it with synonyms that it often gets lumped alongside or used interchangeably with. These are *presence* and *flow*. Presence has been used as a synonym for immersion in many major works on the subject (Murray, Hargadon, Calleja, Keogh, Blackman). Blackman's literature review on the two terms reveals the way that they have been conflated over decades of research, generally representing "a strong sense of being in a virtual world" (408). Some scholars have tried to distinguish the concepts by defining immersion as a "technological quality of media" and presence as the psychological, sensory, and illusive experience of 'being there' (qtd. in Blackman 408). I argue that distinguishing immersion and presence between formal, sensory, and technological means on one hand, and psychological, experiential, and phenomenological on the other is

productive; however, the terms should be flipped to account for the broader history of immersion's discursive use. Outside digital technologies, immersion has been used to describe one's investment in the fictional worlds of novels and movies (Ryan, *Virtual Reality*). The reader of a novel, viewer of a film, or even players of an analogue tabletop game can become immersed in the aesthetic experiences those mediums offer. They can become invested in characters, story, and stylistic affect. However, the point of these experiences is not for the reader/viewer to feel *present* as a subject spatially embodied in the aesthetic experience the object offers. In contrast, a player can feel present in a videogame's virtual world through their spatial, kinesthetic, and ludic interactivity without being immersed narratively or affectively (Calleja 43-44). This distinction is my starting point for framing immersion more precisely as an aesthetic experience desired and actively pursued by videogame developers and players in their respective creative roles—with presence being a formal support to a specifically digital form of immersion.

Flow is another word that frequently appears alongside or is used synonymously with immersion in scholarly research, but the word's discursive history is more firmly rooted in the psychological research of Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and its contributions to research on gamification and human-computer interaction (HCI). In a literature review on the conflations and differences between immersion and flow, Michailidis et al. notes how the two concepts have been used to encompass similar psychological mechanisms when performing an activity with focus, which include "concentration, loss of self-reflection, [and] distortion of time perception," although immersion tends to connote less extreme and particular conditions than

flow (2). However, their own research and the sources they mention are from HCI and consider the broader applicability of digital interactive experiences apart from the specific aesthetics and ontology of commercial videogames. As I will detail further into this section, immersion tends to appear much more prominently in game development language, industry marketing, and player discourse than either presence or flow, which is an aspect of the term that must be taken into consideration to move away from its current over-inclusivity. Moreover, its basis in the theories of digital narrative scholars such as Murray and Ryan is frequently omitted in its continued usage by HCI and psychology-based researchers. At the same time, humanities scholars have opted to abandon this pioneering theoretical basis of immersion, perhaps because the word was stretched so thin that it no longer signified any coherent phenomenon, or because the theories were based in Murray's idealistic vision for digital narratives that was never fulfilled. As a humanities researcher interested in the narrative history of videogames, my intent is to investigate the discursive complexities of immersion as both a technical and fiction-based phenomenon rather than its quantitative effects.

Player immersion, in contrast to reader immersion, is distinguished based on the formal property of digital interactivity (Murray 88-89). Reader-response theorists such as Wolfgang Iser have written about the ways that all engagement with fiction is "interactive," in the sense that readers/viewers/players unite the raw object materials of a novel/movie/game into a holistic aesthetic experience through which the consumer unites and interprets the meaning of that experience (*Act of Reading* 133). However, as Linda Hutcheon

explains, interactivity has an additional meaning when it comes to digital games in that it is the medium's fundamental mode of expression: Hutcheon names three different "modes of engagement" by which someone experiences a medium's narrative content: telling, showing, and interacting. Each mode offers a unique set of conventions and affordances through which a reader—understood generally and loosely here as one who interprets a cultural object—engages with and parses meaning from. As Hutcheon notes, "each mode, like each medium, has its own specificity, if not its own essence. In other words, no one mode is inherently good at doing one thing and not another; but each has at its disposal different means of expression – media and genres – and so can aim and achieve certain things better than others" (24). Each of these modes constitutes its own expressive language across media and thus demands a certain degree of familiarity or literacy for a reader to know how to parse meaning. For this sort of formal interpretation, a reader must understand the medium's creative process to an extent. This is not so the reader will be able to extract a 'correct' or 'intended' reading but so they will understand the ways in which each mode is capable of imparting meaning.

For the interactive mode, which Hutcheon unsurprisingly associates with web-based hypertext and digital games, interaction is understood loosely as a natural property of computer use. Murray conceived it in the same way, linking interactivity to the aesthetic experience of agency: "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices," which operates in a feedback loop with immersion (159). Interactivity pertains to the structural requirement for the user to initiate action for the digital game (as text) to progress, with agency being the sense of immersive involvement that stems

from this feedback loop. As with telling and showing, Hutcheon sees a need for deliberate design in how an interactive text is shaped:

> Although users here are actively involved in making plot choices at certain nodal points as they experience the narrative, it is also the case that the way they 'navigate' through scenery and scenes, 'interact' both with locations and, even more importantly, virtual actors, the perspectives from which they view events, the atmospheres and moods encountered and experienced: everything has to be consciously designed and must adhere to fixed rules. (51)

Examining videogames through the interactive mode is useful for considering the unique formal, structural, and ontological properties of the medium, but this can only ever be an entry point for understanding the hodgepodge of modes and representational elements that materially constitute videogames. I will discuss this further in this section and when I focus on narrative design in Section 3. For now, I will define the concept in itself more clearly through the history of its early usage in game studies before proceeding into the main discussion of this section.

1.2 Defining Immersion

Immersion has been theorized as a core component to the experience of videogames since game studies began to establish itself as an academic field in the late 1990s. As the principal aesthetic of what she terms "digital narrative" (computer-mediated games with storytelling elements) Murray describes immersion as a psychological experience of being submerged into a world of otherness and learning to operate effectively in such a world (124).

Videogame aesthetics are tied to their visual representations of space, and Murray describes this "transitional" movement from real space to virtual space as a central component of the medium: "In psychological terms, computers are liminal objects, located on the threshold between external reality and our own minds" (125). To immerse oneself in the world of a digital game through interaction, then, draws the player into this same liminal space. The concept of liminality is crucial here as it suggests that, during play, the player subject is neither here nor there—neither fully present outside nor within the world represented on the screen (Keogh ch. 2). They operate in a perpetual in-between. Furthermore, Murray argues that the player's comprehensive understanding of their self must be suspended to experience the aesthetic pleasure of immersion, for "[w]hen we enter the enchanted world as our actual selves, we risk draining it of its delicious otherness" (127). The player's avatar and the game's interface function as vessels for the projection of the player's subjectivity into a virtual space, and immersion in this fictional space is crucial to enhancing their investment in the world and deriving meaning from their actions within it.

As Murray sees it, this sense of immersion is crucial to the player appreciating a videogame as a world imbued with narrative meaning. It is a phenomenon experienced on the threshold of player subjectivity and computer hardware as a meeting between imagination and technology. However, her claim that "Cyberspace gains much of its immersive power from spectacular effects" leans into a techno-centric focus of immersion deployed by the videogame industry to promote new hardware and products (139). Although there is a correlation between graphical advancements and the popularity of videogames in the decades since the release of Murray's book in 1997, the growing prevalence of indie games—which

often embrace minimalist graphics and experimental art styles while also prioritizing more nuanced and intimate storytelling—puts this forward-looking idealization into question. Indie titles now compete side-by-side with big-budget AAA videogames in digital marketplaces like Steam and the console-specific stores run by Nintendo, Microsoft, and Sony. To avoid dismissing the creative design iterations and more personal storytelling that indie games have contributed to videogame development, an aesthetics of immersion must be able to account for these non-technical advancements. Another consequence of this rhetoric is that it threatens to dismiss older videogames—which may have once been technically and/or aesthetically impressive—as dated in terms of their capacity for immersion. By conceding that player immersion is possible across videogames with all varieties of graphical representation, I want to focus on immersion as both a technical and imaginative aesthetic effect: the mediation of the player's self between the boundaries of the actual and virtual during a narrative experience. What does immersion signify in the context of videogames and how might it differ from other conceptions of the term? How do these disparate meanings (and their contradictions) help develop a more nuanced understanding of immersion's relevance to player experience?

Early immersion scholars like Murray and Marie-Laure Ryan originally approached the subject with a focus on digital games' narrative potential. This remains a compelling thread for humanities-focused games research that lost some of its traction throughout games studies' ludology versus narratology debate, during which groups of scholars were split between applying traditional narrative understandings to videogame texts (the narratologists) or considering them solely on their own novel terms as *games*, or more accurately, as *rule-*

based systems (the ludologists). An early and contentious claim of ludology was that because games do not follow the same temporal structure as established narrative artforms like literature and film, applying narratological frameworks to understand them is deceptive and disingenuous (Eskelinen). More than anything, however, the debate made it clear that videogames are often a synthesis of both traditional rule-based play *and* structured narrative. The two can complement one another rather than necessarily oppose the other. Shigeru Miyamoto, the celebrated game designer/director/producer of multiple titles in the *Super Mario Bros* and *The Legend of Zelda* franchises, even likened the craft of level design to the narrative progression of four-panel manga comics (qtd. in Nutt). Game design is thus more than the creation of formal rules that the player systemically and mechanically interacts with; understood another way, it is paving the grounds for a narrative satisfaction that is not just told or shown, but actively experienced and constructed.

Through gameplay, the "interactor's navigation of virtual space [is] shaped into a dramatic enactment of the plot" (Murray 100). This dramatic potential of gameplay as such—no matter how abstract and devoid of mimetic representation—is exemplified in Murray's infamous reading of *Tetris* as "the perfect enactment of the overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990s" (136). Ludologists like Eskelinen mocked Murray for this self-oriented analysis of a 1980s Soviet game with no tangible narrative elements to speak of. Yet, as subjective and debatable as Murray's interpretation is, it speaks to the *pre-conscious* narrative experience gameplay offers that can then be *consciously* ascribed a meaning no less 'true' than the interpretations we assign to events in our everyday lives. Regardless of the authorial intent of *Tetris*, which may very well be to simply provide an engaging virtual toy for people

to pass time with, the design principles and distinct momentum of the gameplay can become personally or socially expressive when experienced through the subjectivity of an individual player. With what Sarah Stang calls a feminist, "too-close reading" like Murray's that foregrounds a "latent, subtle, symbolic, connotative" meaning, we can better understand how the interactivity of videogames becomes a playground for interpretation that embraces the co-creative process of gameplay itself ("Too Close" 232). Feminist game studies thus provides a foundation through which to embrace the role of the embodied subject in the interpretation of a videogame's meaning. Early ludology helped provide games their own formalism as rule-based systems and procedural simulations, but it was bound to be outgrown by scholarship that could effectively account for both their ludic and narrative aspirations, and both subjectively and objectively engaged meanings (Frasca 222).

The rest of this chapter will untangle and reconstruct the concept of player immersion from its web of digital and non-digital, as well as formal and subjective, associations. First, I will historically situate the concept of player immersion as a narrative-based phenomenon by investigating the marketing rhetoric around Infocom's interactive fiction (also referred to as 'text adventures') in the early-mid 1980s, which promised a novel aesthetic experience beyond what both print-based fiction and action-based arcade games could offer. Then, I will establish *desire* as the foundation of the immersive lure that has determined both its technologically deterministic and subjective connotations. I will then further unpack immersion in the formal context of digital games as a product of mental and imaginative engagement by contrasting the indie game *Undertale's* story content with its simple 8-bit graphics and self-reflexive breaking of the fourth wall. These latter two aspects of the game

might be considered unrelated or even antithetical to techno-centric conceptions of immersion, yet *Undertale's* success in providing players an emotionally resonant narrative experience suggests otherwise. Afterwards, I will explore how the immersive desire towards virtual worlds preceded digital technology in the ways that readers engaged with certain literary texts throughout the 20th century. Using *Disco Elysium* as a second case study, I will discuss the interplay between immersion and agency to explore how players wield their sense of agency (however illusory) within the virtual world and without to construct meaning from videogame experiences. The chapter will conclude with a research-creation project that creatively misuses gameplay capturing technology to apply immersion's impact on player subjectivity and demonstrate its connection to meaningful gameplay experience.

1.3 Infocom, Immersion, and the Rhetoric of Interactive Fiction

One of the first prominent contributors to the discourse on digital game immersion was Infocom, the software development company who popularized narrative-based digital games as personal computers (PCs) became marketed to average consumers. The PC revolution was a historical phenomenon during the early-mid 1980s in which cultural narratives and rhetoric surrounding the PC, as both an object and idea, hailed consumers by imaginatively stimulating what its seemingly boundless possibilities and impacts could be in everyday life. One of these imagined potentials was the PC as a medium for entertainment, which quickly became tied to the production of computer games. While arcade cabinets and early home gaming consoles (such as the 1977 release of the Atari 2600) ushered in the dawn of videogames using computer technology, the genre that became most intimately tied to the

PC itself was the text-based interactive fiction (IF) games (often referred to as 'text adventures') popularized by Infocom early in the decade. Infocom's IF featured virtual worlds, usually based on a genre of pulp fiction, described and explored entirely through text. Each game's world is divided into segments providing descriptions of location, objects, characters, and events that the player interacts with through typing commands into a parser. As evidenced in their marketing ads (Figure 1, Figure 2), the company took pride in their dedication to compelling writing and worldbuilding, thereby differentiating their games' aesthetic value from the focus on action and graphics that made arcade games appealing. Unlike many videogames of the time, Infocom's intention with IF was not only to provide ludic entertainment, but to advance the practice of storytelling through a new medium that promised a novel immersive experience based on familiar genre fiction.

For a few years after the release of their breakthrough debut, *Zork*, in 1980, Infocom seemed to be fulfilling this ambitious resolve. The company successfully accrued a loyal player base that was interested in their interactive takes on genre fiction. A fantasy game like *Zork* not only allowed its audience to read about a character's interaction with a dragon, for example, but provided a means of playing such a character and making active decisions that lead to the encounter's successful (or unsuccessful) resolution. Infocom provided similar pleasures for fans of other genres, such as having them solve a murder in a timely manner as a detective in their murder-mystery, *Deadline* (1982), or allowing interplanetary exploration and becoming friends with a robot in their science-fiction romp, *Planetfall* (1983). Hargadon notes how genre fiction immerses readers based on the repeated use of conventional "schemas," which have a degree of predictability that makes for a "trance-like" form of

narrative consumption. Infocom's rhetoric of immersion combines this familiar sense of fictional immersion with the enhanced immersivity that computer interaction—and player involvement—supposedly allows. Aside from offering fans of these genres a novel type of wish fulfillment through interactivity, a large part of these games' success was due to Infocom's Z-Machine, a compatible game engine that allowed the company to easily port their games to emerging PC platforms. The use of the Z-Machine meant Infocom games were widely available to almost any PC owner at a time when the market was divided between a variety of competing computers with significantly different hardware specifications, such as the Apple II, TRS-80, and ZX Spectrum. In this sense, the company's success owed as much to its artistic ambitions as its technological innovations. However, as I will explore in this section, Infocom's advertisements tended to undercut the proficiency of their software in favour of a rhetorical focus on their games as fictional wish fulfillment. In other words, Infocom's rhetoric of immersion sanitized its dependence on novel computer technology to appeal to a larger market of fiction lovers.

The rhetoric prevalent in Infocom's advertisements presented the company's interactive fiction as a revolutionary new form of immersive storytelling that promised to close the gap between fiction and reality more than any previous medium had been able to. This advertising rhetoric was supported by the carefully curated packaging of the games (which became known as 'grey boxes') and the literary aspirations of the games' stories. Each grey box contained objects and an instruction manual that were presented as diegetic to the fictional world of the game in an attempt to holistically bridge the gap between the physical software product and the virtual world it contained. These software packages were

consumer friendly in their marketing, with each game clearly signaling the type of genre fiction it draws on (e.g. fantasy, sci-fi, mystery) and containing physical objects (or 'feelies') for players to imaginatively connect with the world before even booting up the game. For instance, a mystery game like *Deadline* came with a fake news clipping reporting the murder that the player must solve throughout the course of the game, while a fantasy game like *Zork* came with a Tolkien-esque map of its fictional underground kingdom. At the same time, Infocom was cautious not to alienate or scare off potential players by downplaying the critical role of the PC as the technology that makes their games possible. They presented their interactive fiction as primarily a literary rather than technological innovation, aiming to turn consumers' attention away from the intimidating technical nuances of running computer hardware through the visually gripping and pulpy packaging of their games. This material and rhetorical focus on software as both physical object and imaginative portal obfuscated the role of the computer itself in the contemporary conception of these digital games as immersive media.

Infocom's IF, in contrast to the parallel rise of videogames, soon became a dated artifact of early computing technology and game development, yet its rhetoric around fictional immersion and earnest storytelling ambitions makes it a crucial historical counterpart to arcade games. I will explore Infocom's prominent yet short-lived role in early game development to help understand the cultural moment as an amalgamation of fears and desires regarding the potential of computers—imaginings which encouraged a paradoxical form of novelty rooted in familiarity. Infocom conceived a genealogy for interactive fiction that excluded mention of the PC itself by showing how a new medium can be understood via

the framework of an older one---in this case, print literature. The grey boxes in which their games were sold meanwhile drew attention away from the software itself (which was contained in a single diskette or floppy disk) in an aesthetically pleasing package that prioritized the player's paratextual imaginative engagement with the fictional world of the game. This history reveals the ways that videogame immersion has always been conceived in conflict between technological determinism and the Romanticism of the imagination.

The name 'interactive fiction' itself explicitly suggests the digital remediation of prose literature. J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin describe remediation as a process "in which one medium is itself incorporated or represented in another medium," and address it as a "defining characteristic of the new digital media" (339). Infocom's advertisements throughout the 1980s drew on the logic of remediation to distinguish the appeal of IF from the parallel rise of arcade-style videogames. The ad titled, "And Now For Something Incompletely Different," describes the experience of playing IF as "something akin to waking up inside a novel" (Figure 1). Similarly, the ad "We Unleash the World's Most Powerful Graphics" subverts the contemporary fascination surrounding computer graphics by celebrating "the limitless imagery of your imagination – a technology so powerful, it makes any picture that's ever come out of a screen look like graffiti by comparison" (Figure 2). Across Infocom's advertisements, IF is presented with an aura of legitimacy because it aspires towards the dramatic heights of literary works, while contemporary videogames are comparatively trivialized for providing purely ludic pleasures. At the same time, the ads frame the principal novelty and enjoyment of IF as derived from the unique interactive nature of computer aesthetics using the language of immediacy, promising to "plug our prose right

into your psyche, and catapult you into a whole new dimension" (Figure 2). Infocom preferred to disguise the material conditions of playing their games as an almost magical transportive experience.

Figure 1. "And Now for Something Incompletely Different!"



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Figure 2. "We Unleash the World's Most Powerful Graphics Technology"

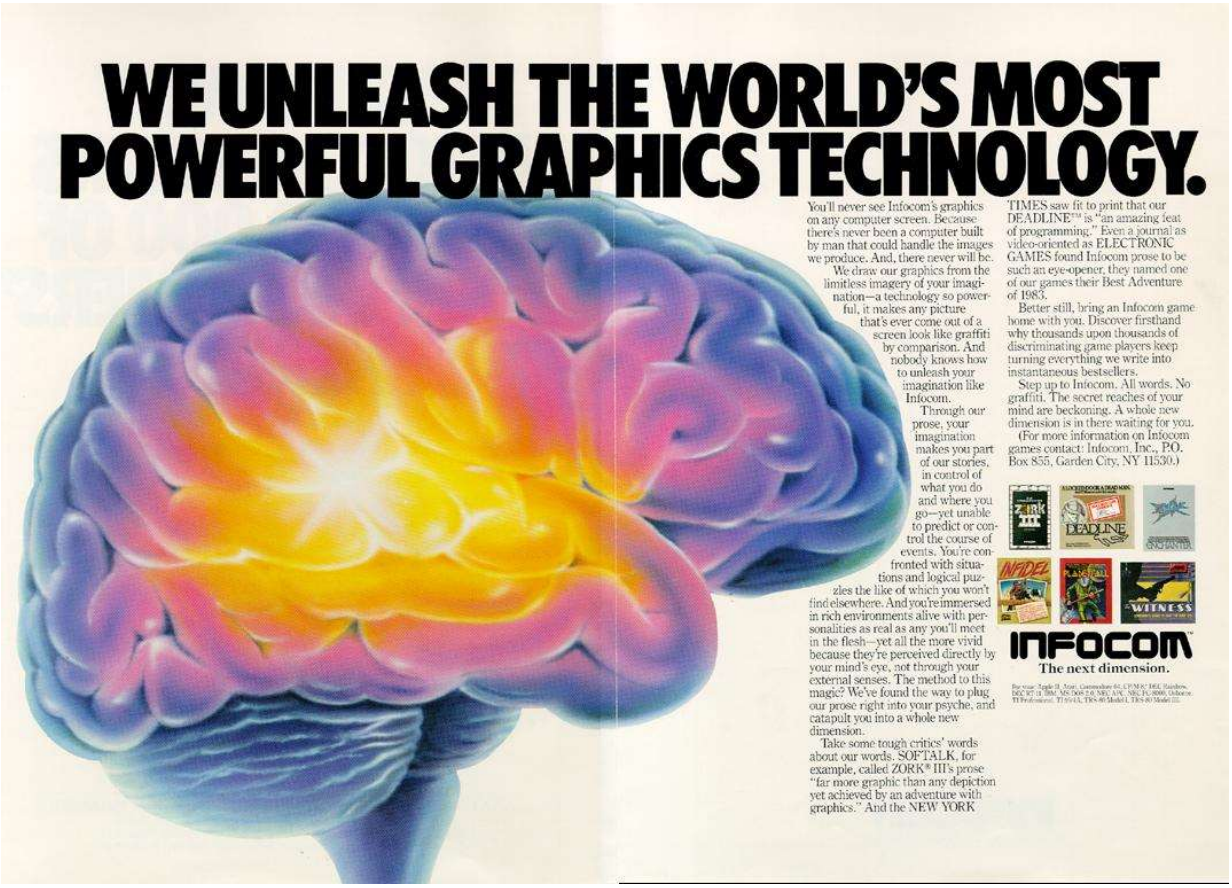


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Infocom ads therefore hailed players by employing a rhetoric of immersion/immediacy that trivializes the value of visuals while underscoring the innovative experience IF provides by implementing computer-based interaction into fictional works of prose. Bolter and Grusin describe immediacy in relation to its idealized potential in virtual reality, which promises "experience without mediation" (317). Even though IF can be regarded as an explicit example of remediation, the lack of competition in interactive storytelling powered Infocom's rhetoric and allowed them to present their games as

technological marvels without ever needing to emphasize their technical components. The ability to interact with a prose-based fictional world rather than simply absorb it spoke for itself as an early incarnation of the aesthetic ideal of virtual reality. Infocom sold the idea of IF as offering an immersion enabled by a specific technology yet not indebted to it, framed instead as a logical and accessible evolution of the aesthetic pleasures print fiction provides readers.

To immerse its players in a virtual world without relying on visuals, IF prose depends on the use of the second-person pronoun, 'you', to identify the player's character. It seems only appropriate, then, that Infocom's advertisements use the same pronoun to hail their audience. In the ad, "The Real Trick is Getting Out" (Figure 3), we are told that players find that "the most remarkable thing about Infocom's interactive fiction is that you become inextricably involved with it." The paragraph proceeds by emphasizing how players' "pulse rates have skyrocketed and their palms have sweated" during gameplay, suggesting a corporeal as well as mental investment involved with interacting with the medium (Figure 3). Virtual experience is thereby aligned with real experience, as the ad implies a holistic, unmediated connection between a human subject and the virtual experience provided in a work of IF—one that effectively leads to the erasure of the PC as a threshold object and supposedly allowing the player a direct presence in the game world. Crucially, nothing in the ad explicitly mentions or shows the computer's role in this process. Despite the often challenging and finicky reality of actually playing one of Infocom's games, the marketing frames the experience as exhilaratingly and effortlessly immersive.

Figure 3. "The Real Trick is Getting Out"

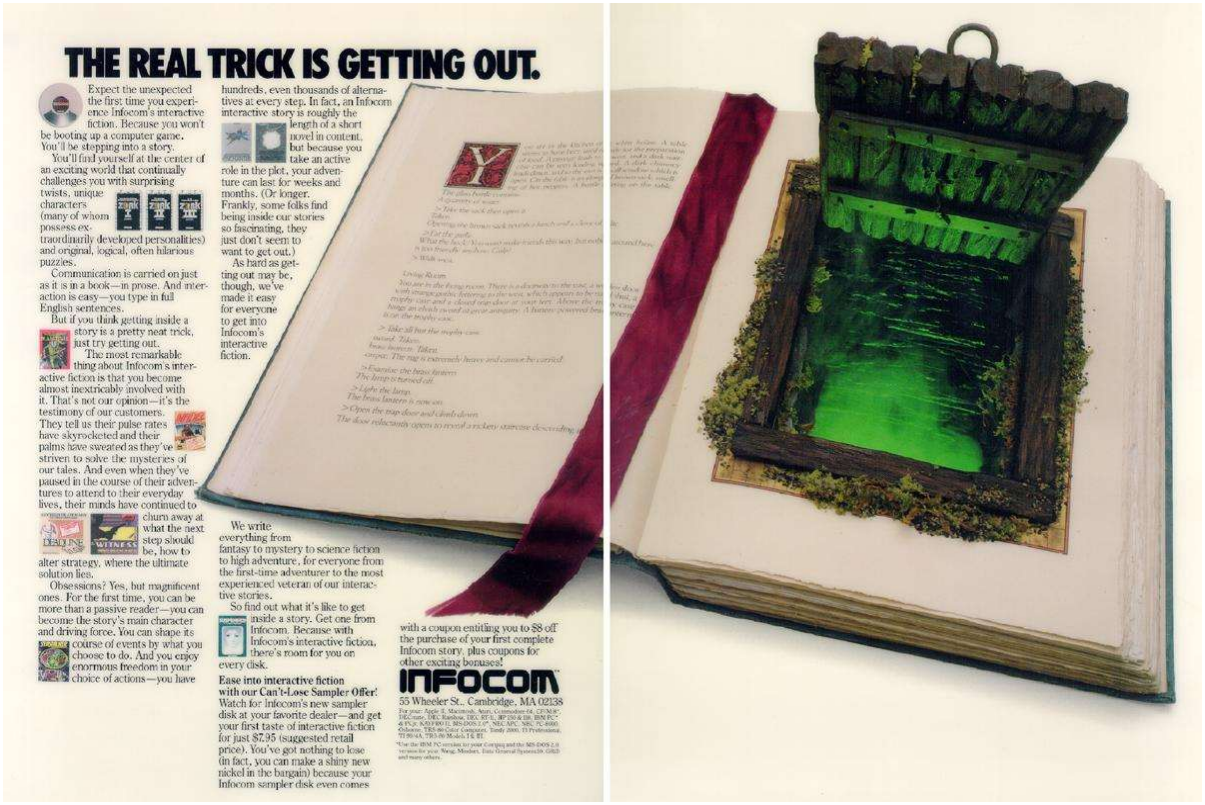


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This deliberate neglect of the computer itself is also seen in the advertisements' visuals, which tend to showcase the pulpy box arts of the games and other familiar and human-centric images instead of anything remotely technological. This makes "The Real Trick's" central image of an open book—featuring prose on one page and a more prominently foregrounded portal-like trapdoor on the other—unusually imposing, spanning most of the space in the two-page ad. Similar to the ad's text, nothing about this image denotes the hardware of computers; rather, it connotes nostalgia and fantasy through the fable-like presentation of the book (signalled by worn pages and the crimson ribbon lying

down the middle) and the mysterious allure of the trapdoor (signalled by its rustic construction and the unnatural green hue emanating from its depths). This image explicitly evokes the notion presented in the ad's first paragraph, that when playing IF, "you won't be booting up a computer game. You'll be stepping into a story" (Figure 3). The rhetorical mobilization of nostalgia in this advertisement ensures that the material reality of IF, including the intricacies of working a computer, is obscured in favour of highlighting the unique narrative experience it offers the player's imagination.

By emphasizing IF's remedial nature and aesthetic ambitions rather than its technological foundation, Infocom's ads make a conscious effort to hail not only people with prior computer experience, but anyone with an interest in engaging with fiction. It just so happens that the computer is the means through which fiction has been able to evolve into a new, interactive form. Accordingly, the ad tells us that "[f]or the first time, you can be more than a passive reader – you can become the story's main character and driving force" (Figure 3). In this sense, the ad implies that the computer's contribution to fiction writing is that the reader/player is given agency over the stories they become invested in, even if this is never explicitly stated. The allure of this immersive empowerment, along with the accompanying phenomenon that some players "just don't seem to want to get out" of it, is the primary way that the discourse surrounding IF developed an idealized conception of digital game immersion that continues to feature in our cultural imaginary of the medium (Figure 3).

When Infocom first began releasing their games in 1980, their text-based interface visually and functionally resembled the command-line interfaces that were the standard for PC use. The immediate connection between player and fiction that Infocom promised their

consumers thus adhered to standardized functionality. Yet, with the introduction of graphical user interfaces (GUI) and the continual technological and aesthetic progress of videogames as the decade continued, this rhetoric of immediacy when applied to technically obsolete software quickly became outdated. IF's creative remediation of prose lost its allure when computer graphics continued to create new standards for interactive entertainment. Bolter and Grusin describe this as a historical inevitability in new media: "digital technologies of immediacy always end up being remediations, even as, indeed precisely because, they appear to deny mediation" (345). Even today, virtual reality continues to be popularly regarded as the benchmark of immediacy in computer entertainment—likely because it has yet to fulfill this unreasonably idealized expectation.

Hindsight reveals Infocom's naivety in promoting their interactive fiction as the golden standard of immersive gaming experiences while computer technology was still in its infant stage. Infocom's drastic decline in sales beginning in 1985 coincided with two radical innovations in computer technology: the release of the Macintosh PC, which featured an elegant and accessible GUI; and the release of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), which showcased the continuously budding potential of videogames as they began to incorporate text and story alongside more graphically sophisticated representations of fictional worlds. In his study of *Machine Beauty*, David Gerlernter stresses that "[the Macintosh's] advantages–and this was the whole point–weren't esoteric or technical; they were obvious to anyone who had ever used a computer" (83). This perceptible, surface-level obviousness in technological innovation would render IF 'dated' in the eyes of consumers who had already used a Macintosh or played on an NES. While Infocom began to fail

financially partially due to its ambitious expansion into the market of business software with *Cornerstone*, their game sales in 1985 were halved after exponential growth throughout the first half of the decade (Briceno et al. 37-38). A similar trend emerged in the mid-late 1990s when polygonal 3D games became the new standard on consoles like the Nintendo 64 and Playstation, and the technological novelty of titles like *Final Fantasy VII* drew commercial attention away from its 2D competition regardless of the quality of their design and content. This history shows how player immersion—as the narrative-based phenomenon that Infocom conceived it as—is simultaneously dependent on technological standards yet operates without it in the imagination of the player.

Further assessment of Infocom's influence in conceiving immersion as a narrative-based, imaginary phenomenon demands consideration of their games' design affordances. For all of Infocom's rhetorical flourishes in their advertisements, the decline of their game sales in 1985 demonstrates how a piece of software's success often depends on its perceived usability. Following James J. Gibson's original definition of the term, an affordance refers to "an action possibility available in the environment to an individual, independent of the individual's ability to perceive" (McGrenere and Ho 1). IF's text-based interaction was both revolutionary for granting the player a sense of boundless agency—in that they could theoretically participate within the game's fiction in whatever manner they could think up—and flawed in its opacity regarding what inputs would yield functional results. In all Infocom games, the player's interactions with the game world are conducted by typing into a parser: a portion of the program that analyzes a string of characters in order to recognize grammatical units. The parser is able to respond to full English sentences through object-oriented natural

language processing. Interacting with a parser is much like using a command line interface, except here the user is not merely executing formal processes but participating in a fictional world.

For anyone familiar with *Dungeons and Dragons* (who would include a large part of the audience that Infocom was appealing to), Infocom's writers conceived of the human-computer interaction that drove gameplay as a relationship between the player and a spectral, omniscient dungeon master who rules on each proposed action and relays the consequences. Thus, command line interaction was related to the conversation that occurs between a *Dungeons and Dragons* role-player and their dungeon master. Although Infocom games did not incorporate audio into gameplay, the game's diskette would create a whirring noise as the interface generated a response to the player's command. The effect of this sound made it "as though there was an actual person or 'dungeon master' on the other side of the screen", creating a sense as if the computer was speaking in response to their proposed actions (Barton). In this manner, it is evident how the material conditions surrounding software use can provide a novel aesthetic experience.

Infocom's parser-based interface promised players the potential for boundless agency. Instead of merely selecting a few set commands from a menu, IF encouraged players to imagine infinite possibilities, as there are no material constraints to what the player can type into the parser. This sense of agency is, however, mostly an illusion. An unavoidable aspect of playing IF is typing commands that the computer rejects. For instance, a scene description may include an object (e.g. a family heirloom) but trying to interact with it ("look at heirloom") will yield a generic error response ("The word 'heirloom' isn't in your

vocabulary") since the designer did not account for that particular interaction as part of the gameplay (Blanc). Here lies a fundamental design flaw of the genre: as a consequence of the parser conveying a sense of freedom, the affordances (or action possibilities) available to the player in an Infocom game are not always clearly conveyed. In describing the connection between an affordance and its usability, McGrenere and Ho indicate that the "usability of a design can be enhanced by clearly designing the perceptual information that specifies these affordances" (6). Infocom's instruction manuals provide some guidance regarding key inputs for the player to use, but their games' heavy focus on puzzle solving means that the player is often left to blindly guess or painstakingly deduce what verbs they should try out on which objects to progress. In this sense, the usability of an Infocom game lacks a clear sense of the affordances at the player's disposal and the player's first encounter with any of them is bound to require ample trial and error just to get a sense of how to navigate the virtual space and interact with its objects.

For what Infocom lacked in visually gripping or user-friendly gameplay, they tried to make up for through elegant packaging meant to better draw in and immerse consumers to their games' worlds. In this sense, the company's appeals to the logic of immediacy extended beyond the gameplay interface of the computer screen and into the player's physical world. The company enlisted the help of ad agency Giardini/Russell to supply their games with elaborate packaging materials, a paratextual method of stimulating the imagination of their consumers (Beery). The aesthetically pleasing packaging of these 'grey boxes' was a revolutionary method of positioning software, rather than hardware, as the focus of the consumer experience. In comparison, other pieces of software at the time were usually sold

in Ziploc bags with Xeroxed manuals, showing little regard for presenting the item as a distinct “thing” (Barton). A single grey box cost around $40 and they were sold in computer shops as well as bookstores—a move that adhered to Infocom’s marketing attempts to appeal not only to computer users but book lovers (Beery). A grey box even opened like a book and housed several items, including the diskette or floppy disc containing the game itself, colorful manuals that contained both lore for the game’s world and instructions for how to play, as well as miscellaneous peripheral artifacts, which Infocom dubbed ‘feelies.’ The feelies contained in each box were meant to extend the game’s fictional world with a fictional yet physical presence.

Figure 4. "A Mind Forever Voyaging"



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For instance, the dystopian sci-fi game *A Mind Forever Voyaging* came with a mocked-up map of Rockvil, the fictional American city that the game is set in; a security decoder that the player had to refer to in order to progress at certain points in the game; a futuristic pen from a fictional insurance company; and the game's instruction manual, which is presented as a magazine diegetic to the game's world (Figure 4). Feelies like the decoder also served an alternative function for Infocom, working as an anti-piracy measure by preventing anyone without the grey box from progressing past a certain point in the game. In this sense, the software and its packaging were naturally melded into a complete product that were both meant to immerse the player in the virtual world. In a bold move that ambitiously tried to give software a palpable materiality, Infocom deliberately withheld information about their games' affordances from anyone without access to the official packaging. This demonstrates how crucially intertwined the materiality of computers and computer products—particularly in how they were presented during the PC revolution—is with the way developers are able to appeal to the imagination of consumers. Many of today's videogames can be regarded as a combination of the narrative pleasures text-based IF promised and the flashy and action-heavy ludic pleasures arcade games offered.

Players curious or accustomed to the functionality and aesthetics of Infocom games may still find them immersive while others will barely tolerate playing them. The same could be said of any generation of videogames now considered 'retro'—from the 8-bit pixels of the NES to the once realistic yet now aged 3D graphics of the Playstation 2. Perceived technical and design obsolescence can be a major hurdle to player enjoyment and immersion and can even run counter to other aspects of aesthetic appreciation. The next section will consider the

ways that the videogame industry of the last few decades has seized the term immersion for the marketing of new tech and depend on the perception of obsolescence to fund and justify new hardware. Whereas Infocom disguised the centrality of the PC's tech while promoting its games, the modern game industry's use of immersion has promoted a techno-fetishization that equates new technology with better games. I will disentangle this rhetorical strategy to re-center player immersion as a primarily narrative phenomenon—one derived from computer technology yet not rooted in a technocapitalist idea of linear progress.

1.4 Immersion as Player Desire

Following Infocom's Romantic rhetorical conception of immersion and parallel to game studies scholars' continued engagement with the term, the videogame industry has used the concept as a marketing buzzword to promote new hardware (Sinclair, Goldfarb, "New Gaming Tech") and the games that push that hardware to showcase its graphical potential ("Forspoken – PS5™ Next Gen Immersion"). While new hardware's ability to produce more graphically detailed and seamlessly performing virtual worlds has wide appeal for many consumers—and can contribute to players feeling the absorbing sensory experiences Murray fantasized about—its underlying capitalist association should not be ignored. The economic mechanisms of the games industry want us to believe that our immersion in a videogame, our spatial and imaginative investment in the game's virtual world, depends on purchasing the latest hardware or the most graphically demanding games. Consequently, immersion has become a buzzword for technocultural consumption that can detract from the history of games, including less technically oriented innovations and iterations in design and

storytelling. O'Gorman defines technoculture as "a culture of *technology for technology's sake*," which the game industry has proliferated through its focus on selling new consoles through graphically intensive AAA videogames (12). While such flagship games sometimes offer innovative design to validate the technical leap, such as *Super Mario 64's* (1996) leap to intuitive 3D movement, in more recent times design innovation tends to take a backseat to spectacle for its own sake—as evidenced by the almost annually recycled design of the recent *Call of Duty* (2003-present) and *Assassin's Creed* (2007-present) games. This technocultural rhetoric also obscures the significance of less flashy and visually gripping game elements such as sound design, interface presentation, writing, and affordances to establishing a consistent and coherent game world that players can immerse themselves into. A game's narrative design depends on the expressive interplay between these many multimedia elements that encompass the player's understanding of the game's world (Breault 9).

Despite what the videogame industry's rhetoric suggests, a player will not necessarily feel immersed in a videogame based on graphical prowess alone. The game must invest them in its world in other ways, too. In response to the nebulous understandings of immersion around digital game discourse, neuroscience studies were conducted finding "that players do a lot of the work toward immersion themselves. People more prone to fantasising and daydreaming – i.e. more absorptive personalities – are able to become more immersed in game worlds" (Stuart). High graphical fidelity alone will fail to immerse players if other aspects of its fictional realization are uninteresting to them. Immersion derives as much from the player's mind as it does from the game itself, constituting a meeting of both. In Gordon Calleja's critical evaluation of immersion, he notes how "the nature of the content in

conjunction with the participant's interpretative apparatus and prior lived experience is crucial for a sense of presence[1]" (21). Not only can immersion's effects on a player equally stem from other aspects of a videogame's multimodal textuality, such as sound, writing, and level design, but often derives from the player's own subjective investment in the game's content.

Scholars like Ryan, Calleja, and Brendan Keogh have each in their own ways continued the work on immersion that Murray began by demonstrating how the phenomenon operates on the threshold of the real and virtual rather than piercing through it, how it is actively desired and constructed rather than passively entered, and how it is a combination of unconscious involvement and conscious attention. Ryan notes how immersion is conditional on the player's deliberate act of *recentering*: "to experience [the game] as actual… consciousness relocates itself to another world and, taking advantage of the indexical definition of actuality, reorganizes the entire universe of being around this virtual reality" (*Virtual Reality* 73). Recentering one's subjectivity requires the player to extend their grasp of actuality to a virtual world where they are no longer acting purely as themself—that is, as a consciously unified self. The immersed subject is co-determined by their interactions with the processes and representations of the game and their interpretive response to them. Keogh similarly critiques immersion as a taken-for-granted phenomenon inherent to digital gameplay, noting how one's "sense of immersion in a virtual world is thus a desired, deliberate act of perception performed by the videogame player that is dependent not on the

[1] Calleja uses *immersion* and *presence* interchangeably.

virtual world being autonomous from the actual but on the reflexive splicing of actual and virtual worlds" (Chapter 1). Immersion is never a totalizing transition from real to virtual as two distinct spaces; rather, it works as a liminal, oscillating state that playfully negotiates the boundaries between what exists outside and inside the screen. Understood another way, immersion depends on the player's own motivation to feel immersed.

Calleja and Keogh have made efforts to abandon the transcendent subjective presumption that immersion carries with it by replacing it with new terms like *incorporation* and *embodiment*, respectively. With incorporation, Calleja reconfigures immersion as "a double axis" where the player internalizes "the game environment into consciousness while *simultaneously* being incorporated through the avatar into that environment" (169). This helps move past the notion of virtual spaces being "experientially separate otherworlds" that we can transport ourselves to via immersion "and to treat them instead as domains continuous with the media-saturated reality of everyday life" (Calleja 179). Keogh's notion of player embodiment tries to repair this same issue with immersion to instead highlight players' "liminal, distributed presence across worlds and across bodies that is never resolved and that is fundamental to how videogames are experienced" (Intro). Yet, in conceiving of computers as liminal objects, Murray also understood to an extent how immersion is more a mediation than a total absorption of the self into a digital space. Players may wish to enter a world of otherness and inhabit an alternate identity to feel involved in the sensory and imaginative promise of a game world, but what actually occurs is more frayed between the real and virtual.

Theorists have likened the videogame player to a posthuman subject, who negotiates the malleable boundaries between real and virtual space(s), as well as self and avatar(s), in their pursuit of immersion. Jonathan Boulter conceives of videogames as posthuman parables, drawing on the definition of parable as "a story that essentially hides itself from those who do not have the capacity to see" (3). This secretive meaning of the parable plays off "an economy of desire" where gameplay has the potential to be "an event that may in fact be creating an entirely *new* kind of experience of the self" as a decentered posthuman subject (Boutler 2-3). Hayles originally defined the posthuman subject as a "collectivity, an 'I' transformed into the 'we' of autonomous agents operating together to make a self" (6). Western philosophers long understood the self as a stable *being* firmly rooted in itself, while posthuman thinkers—and Zen Buddhists long before them—understand this being "as a *becoming*" (Nishitani 221). The play of identity in the digital age and the posthuman subjectivity of the videogame player only make this perpetually embodied becoming more apparent in everyday living. Immersion thus points towards a consistently desired yet inconsistently realized being-as-becoming of the player subject both in the context of an individual game and the repeated return to playing. As fundamentally unstable and temporary, immersion is pursued in the recurrent act of play. This parabolic effect engages players in a repeated dialectic of loss and return to gameplay where what matters to the player is less the fulfillment of the desired immersion than the earnest pursuit of that desire as such.

Immersion as a theoretical concept has been thoroughly critiqued by scholars who have found more nuance in the interaction between player and videogame. So why do I insist on

dwelling on the word despite its inconsistent and corporately compromised usage? Because immersion, since its theoretical invocation in game studies, has come to signify the unique narrative experience that videogames offer and the productive struggles scholars have had in articulating that experience. It is my goal to elucidate how that narrative experience is expressed through the design of the game and its significations for the immersed player. While Calleja and Keogh's critiques of early definitions of immersion are well-founded, and the new terms they use carry valuable new observations about the player experience with them, the fact remains that these terms are still premised on the immersive desire players seek from videogames. As Gayatri Spivak writes in her celebrated preface to Derrida's famous deconstructive opus, *Of Grammatology*: "To make a new word is to run the risk of forgetting the problem or believing it solved… For whatever a concept might 'mean,' anything that is conceived of in its being-present must lead us to the already-answered question of being" (xv-xvi). Any new idea founded on a revision or critique of immersion only further builds on the word's complex web of meanings. In the interest of untangling and deconstructing this web, I address immersion historically, formally, and phenomenologically as a desire for a certain kind of experience from videogames: a desire for narrative meaning derived from the meeting of objective design and technical elements as well as subjective gameplay experience. To properly conceive of immersion in the context of videogames requires simultaneously invoking its significance to understanding players' engagement with the medium while acknowledging the aesthetic impossibility of the immersive ideal—that is, the technically seamless and complete transition from real to virtual world and self.

The immersive desire is the desire to interact with a fictional world not just as a spectator but as an actor. It is the desire to feel like an active participant in the creation of a story. It is the desire to temporarily adopt and test out a new identity for oneself. And it is the desire to roleplay this identity against other agents (whether represented by real people or the game itself) in a reciprocal interaction. The reason corporate marketing continues to leverage the word 'immersion' when promoting their new products is because it still represents—as strongly as ever—the desires players hold towards the medium. On one hand, the desire is technological: as Bolter and Grusin note, immersion (or the sensation of immediate proximity to a virtual representation) was taken for granted as an inherent property of virtual reality that promised to close the gap between a work of art and its reader/viewer/player (316). Mel Slater suggests this strictly formal technological property of feeling that one is "in" a sensorially coherent "place" is *presence*, a word related to yet often conflated with immersion (607). Presence is formal; immersion is phenomenological. Accordingly, the immersive desire is based in active engagement with representational content: as Murray conceived, the reason we want technology to provide us believable virtual worlds is to be able to enjoy them as an aesthetically meaningful experience. This pleasure can be reduced to the immediately perceptible (pre-conscious) audiovisual-haptic experience a virtual world provides or extended to the (conscious) narrative engagement that can derive from that (Keogh ch. 1). A player may feel highly present in a detailed 3D game world or virtual reality space, but they will not necessarily feel immersed if there is no audiovisual, mechanical, or narrative content to engage not only their senses, but capture their imaginative interest. I present a theory of immersion that considers how the pre-conscious and conscious

aspects of immersion inform one another in the player's engagement with (e.g. 'roleplaying,' as discussed in Section 2) and interpretation of a videogame's narrative design.

Murray's idealistic conception of immersion is premised on a universal aesthetic experience at the core of videogames that threatens to subsume the multiple different narrative pleasures they offer. As Keogh contests, "immersion is often treated as an inherent attribute of the videogame form rather than as a perceptual strategy performed by an actual player engaging with input devices, screen imagery, and digital sounds" (Introduction). It is here where I depart most adamantly from Murray's definition. Immersion cannot be an inherent property of videogames because narrative is not even an inherent property of videogames. A videogame can incorporate explicitly narratological elements such as cut scenes or expository text and dialogue, but ultimately it is the player's choice whether they make sense of the whole of the audiovisual-haptic experience games offer as narratively coherent. Every time a player begins a game they have "a *choice* between imagining the world of the game and seeing the representation as a mere placeholder for information about the rules of the game" (Juul Introduction, emphasis added). Ultimately, because videogames offer multiple means of involvement—whether it be derived from the ludic, spatial, or narrative aspects of the game—the player has agency in how they choose to engage with them. In defining six distinct modes of involvement the player can engage in during gameplay, Calleja notes how conscious attention can only be given fully to one category at a time (44). All players will have different interests and thus experience the game and its world differently. The desire to feel immersed and work towards fulfilling that desire is thus an act of agency.

Whenever I speak of the player's immersion, then, it is with acknowledgment of a player who desires to be immersed. I hesitate to call this an 'ideal player' in the sense of Umberto Eco's notion of an 'ideal reader' for there is nothing stable or generalizable about immersed players other than this fundamental desire. Otherwise, each player brings forth their own sense of subjectivity, identity, past experience, and embodiment that together act as the ultimate contingency for shaping the potential meanings of and values derived from their gameplay experience (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 9). Reconceiving immersion as a desire for a posthuman being that is playfully unstable, decentered, and in a perpetual state of becoming helps resolve the contradictory essentialist definitions that have been assigned to it. This conception points towards a type of digital being, of virtual subjectivity, that gameplay naturally lends itself to while allowing the meaning of that gameplay to stem from from the local, individual pursuits of every player. Before exploring this virtual subjectivity in greater theoretical detail, I will first use the immersion-as-desire framework to further unpack the paradox of immersion as derived from its historically based technological associations and resulting assumptions.

1.5 The Paradox of Immersion

Drawing on its use in media studies more broadly, immersion has been associated with the aesthetic ideal of immediacy. As her book title explicitly references, Murray idealized digital narrative through the metaphor of Star Trek's holodeck, introduced in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* as an entertainment device that transports its users to a fictional world where they become the protagonist in a movie-like embodied experience. This idea glamorizes a

potential type of videogame that does not rely on control through a hardware peripheral and interface clutter, but rather presents a virtual world that fully and seamlessly envelops the player's sensations and perceptions. It is an idea of narrative engagement supported by the dream of virtual reality before virtual reality (VR) technologies revealed themselves to be physically cumbersome and nauseating for many users (Chang et al.). While a VR game like Valve's *Half-Life: Alex* has managed to integrate an innovative use of VR technology with narrative intrigue, it is an exception to a platform that continues to predominantly feature games more interested in providing simple, experimental ludic experiences.

Players seeking prolonged, engrossing holodeck-like experiences are more likely to find them in non-VR videogames. A modern blockbuster videogame, such as CD Projekt RED's *Cyberpunk 2077*, is built in an advanced graphics engine that allows for an inordinate amount of detail in environmental rendering and realistically nuanced character animations. With its focus on dramatic first-person storytelling and action, *Cyberpunk 2077* may be the closest videogames have come to reflecting a holodeck-like experience yet. At the same time, multi-million-dollar games like *Cyberpunk 2077* are for the most part still played in an almost identical manner as they were thirty years ago: with a gamepad controller (for consoles) or keyboard and mouse (for PC), and with narrative decisions selected from a list of limited options. In the case of *Cyberpunk 2077*, the game's technical ambitions also resulted in an infamous plague of game-breaking and immersion-breaking bugs when it first launched in December 2020 (Halleman). While *Cyberpunk 2077* was a particularly notorious case of a modern AAA videogame being released in such a state, such releases have become increasingly common over the past decade (Williams). The dream of technologically driven

immersion is thus continually cast into question by the shortcomings of the AAA game industry and VR technology. As the growing prevalence of narratively ambitious and intimate indie games has shown, even graphical realism—a common aesthetic ideal that surfaced alongside the more detailed 3D modeling that was developed throughout the 2000s—is no longer a necessary 'evolution' towards offering more compelling narrative experiences in games.

It is reductive to consider immersion solely in regards to the unique technological novelties of the medium and the spectacle they can provide (until 'outdated' by new capabilities). In, "Remediation," Bolter and Grusin explain the history of the aesthetic ideal of immediacy. The desire for immediacy was theoretically epitomized in the dream of a seamless virtual reality that, like the holodeck, promised to efface the physical hardware of the computer from interaction to bring users directly into a virtual environment: "a transparent interface is one that erases itself, so that the user would no longer be aware of confronting a medium, but instead would stand in an immediate relationship to the contents of the medium" (318). This ideal continues to drive VR research and development through the terms "immersion" and "presence," although as I described earlier, presence is a more accurate descriptor for this technical focus (Blackman 408). Yet, ultimately, Bolter and Grusin suggest that this ideal of immediacy is a myth. Through the concept of *remediation*, the authors suggest that every new technological and artistic medium merely incorporates its predecessors: "digital technologies of immediacy always end up being remediations, even as, indeed precisely because, they appear to deny mediation" (Bolter and Grusin 345). In considering what makes videogames immersive, then—especially from a narrative

standpoint—we must think not only about what they do differently from existing storytelling media, but how they adapt/remediate/incorporate other media's representational and communicative properties.

Videogames do not only remediate the storytelling aspects of literature's linguistic and film's audiovisual affordances but the rule-based nature of games, as encompassed in Hutcheon's modes of engagement (24). They are a unique remediation insofar as they synthesize these modes. Importantly, however, an accurate ontological understanding of videogames must recognize that none of these modes should be privileged over the other in a general sense. Different videogame genres, and individual titles within those genres, prioritize different modes of involvement, so this needs to be considered on a case-by-case basis. As Keogh mentions, the focus on ludology in early game studies placed a disproportionate focus on studying videogames predominantly as rule-based procedural systems, but videogames "are not a core game wrapped in an interchangeable audiovisual skin; videogames are materially constituted by their audiovisuality" (Introduction). Using immersion and ergodicity as the terms that epitomize the narratological and ludological understanding of videogames, respectively, Keogh notes how the former "reduces the videogame to an essence of pure content (just the virtual world)" while the latter "reduces the videogame to an essence of pure form (just mechanical interactions)" (ch. 1). A perspective that accounts for videogames' remediation and holistic integration of both ludic and narrative media is necessary to grasp what they are and how they are experienced.

As I discussed in the "Defining Immersion" section, sources ranging from Murray to game industry marketing have highlighted technical qualities such as a graphically realistic

setting or a first-person perspective as advanced means to facilitate this mental phenomenon. While hardware and software enhancements in videogames' graphical capabilities have led to the creation of massive, detailed, and beautifully rendered game worlds, this notion inevitably undercuts the capability of technologically neutral factors, such as text, minimalist art styles, and creative and/or subversive design ideas—often leveraged in indie games—for creating thematically cohesive worlds that can immerse players without the need for advanced graphical engines. This claim is not meant to downplay the potential of graphically advanced games to provide groundbreaking experiences but to insist that a majority of what makes a game immersive is possible without such superficial capabilities. Rather, the potential for a game to draw players into a consistent state of immersion lies in the opportunities for meaningful interaction that the medium affords, and how the game frames its interactivity with thematic purpose: that is, how gameplay can flesh out, rather than simply add on top of, the interior logic of the game's narrative design. Representing a game world through text and/or low-fidelity graphics can afford unique immersive opportunities despite, and even by leveraging, their representational limitations. Graphically simplistic representations can offer a symbolic form of imaginative engagement that more realistic gaming experiences largely forego with their strictly mimetic visual language.

Before delving further into this phenomenon, however, it is worth distinguishing how the immersion of the videogame player differs from immersion in non-digital media and games. Ryan gives us a way of differentiating player immersion from other forms of immersion by separating the former into two separate forms, *ludic immersion* and *narrative immersion*: "Whereas ludic immersion presupposes a physically active participant, narrative

immersion is an engagement of the imagination in the construction and contemplation of a storyworld that relies on purely mental activity" ("From Narrative Games" 54). Calleja makes note of the same dichotomy in defining "*immersion as absorption*" (in an activity) versus "*immersion as transportation*" (into another space) (26-27). What makes digital games unique from both analogue/athletic games and literature/film is that whereas the former grouping necessitates only the "deep absorption in the performance of a task" that constitutes ludic immersion, and the latter demands the spatial, epistemic, and emotional engagement of narrative immersion, videogames combine interactivity and storytelling and therefore depend on the interplay of both forms (Ryan, "From Narrative Games" 54). Moreover, as interactive digital media, the formal structure of *presence*—of having one's existence "within a virtual world acknowledged by the system itself… fundamentally alters how the player perceives [themself] within the world" (Calleja 22-23). As I previously discussed, presence and immersion have often been conflated as terms for measuring physical and mental engagement in a videogame world. Acknowledging the former as a formal condition of digital media and the latter as a phenomenological state that can be supported by digital interactivity allows us to appreciate the ways that videogame immersion both derives and is unique from other fictional and ludic experiences (Slater 607). A videogame's meaning as an aesthetic experience is doubled between its ludic and narrative components. While many narrative-heavy games can be enjoyed purely by virtue of their gameplay and displaced from any thematic ambitions, narrative immersion is both what the game can facilitate outside of or alongside its ludic challenges and also what can infuse them with greater meaning for the player. As a mental state premised on the engagement of the

player's imagination, narrative immersion can deepen from the mental activity that text and symbolic visuals provoke.

1.5.1 Case Study: *Undertale*

The implementation of character dialogue and descriptive text can help establish an aesthetically coherent game world by which game narratives can immerse players with minor technological demands, especially when these representational elements hold thematic consistency with the gameplay. In this sense, for narrative immersion to retain a consistent hold on the player, the signs presented in gameplay should ideally be interpretable *along with* the signs presented in the narrative. Toby Fox's indie hit *Undertale* subverts the violent conventions of the RPG genre by offering a pacifist alternative to its enemy encounters. Instead of treating the world's monsters as mere obstacles—a common trope of RPG and videogame design more broadly—the player can express compassion by sparing them. *Undertale's* enemy encounters thereby provide an opportunity for socialization that is in tune with its narrative's overarching meta-commentary on the value of forming emotional bonds with virtual characters and the role of violence in the agency (or lack thereof) afforded to players in most other RPGs. The game further supports this thematic coherency through the iconic, individualized appearances of each of the game's monsters, as well as with the implementation of textual descriptions that provoke the player to project their imagination onto the otherwise nondescript graphical environment. Using *Undertale* as its case study, this section will explore how self-reflexivity and low-fidelity graphics can enhance player immersion—exposing a paradox in the term's transportive connotations.

In what seems like a contradictory move, *Undertale* attempts to invest its players emotionally in its cast of benevolent monsters while consistently drawing attention to the artificiality of its world through frequent instances of self-reflexive humor and characters who break the fourth wall and speak directly to the player. Immersion and self-reflexivity are usually considered at odds with one another, since the former is conceived as psychologically closing the distance between oneself and a fictional world, while the latter forces a critical separation. In a study on the use of self-reflexivity in adventure games, Bonello theorizes the inclusion of metaleptic humor as a "quasi-Brechtian distancing":

> there is a relationship between interaction and interruption, entailing an effect of disconnection from the unfolding events within the game, which also has an impact on the way these moments are experienced… the player acts within the gameworld through the avatar, yet the player character retains distinct characteristics, leading to an 'oscillation' and construction of identity between the two 'subject positions' of avatar and player 'within,' and 'in relation to,' the gameworld.

The aesthetics of immersion, as theorized by Murray and Ryan, are not inherently opposed to this sort of distancing. Murray's original definition of immersion idealizes it as a complete mental transition from external reality to virtual reality, where the threshold of the screen (and the physical awareness of threshold objects such as controllers) has been overcome. Yet, not only is this idealized transitional experience still unrealized in the medium; it is also psychologically undesirable: "that is, the objects of the imaginary world should not be too enticing, scary, or real lest the immersive trance be broken" (Murray 146). This reveals that the function of immersion is inherently paradoxical: the desire to become immersed is to feel

invested in a fictional world; yet, crucially, as Ryan notes: "the backgrounded knowledge that it was all made up and does not affect a human life holds the dosage within the limits of pleasure… to the simulating mind, it does not matter whether the envisioned state of affairs is true or false and its development known or unknown because simulation makes it temporarily true and present" (*Virtual Reality* 117). Unlike Murray's conception of immersion as transportive, Ryan and Bonello describe the phenomenon as an oscillation. The immersed player's sense of presence shifts back and forth from conscious reality to virtual reality as they engage with the game as both plaything and fictional world. It is this inherent paradox in the enticement of simulation, then, rather than the total transitional breakthrough from reality to virtual world, that makes immersion functional and appealing.

Following this more nuanced conception of immersion should lead us to question the notion that visual spectacle is inherently more immersive than a lack thereof. Scott McCloud, in his application of semiotic principles to the language of comics—or, the language of *icons* as he calls it—stresses the more active and intimate engagement one is forced to participate in with abstracted images compared to realistic ones: "Icons demand our participation to make them work. There is no life [in the icon] except that which you give it. It's your job to create and recreate [the cartoon image] moment by moment" (59). McCloud calls the semiotic effect of this interaction between iconic image and imagination *amplification through simplification*: "When we abstract an image through cartooning, we're not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning,' an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't" (30). Similar to comics, many indie games work with abstract visuals. Games like *Undertale* can

take advantage of the language of icons to engage the player's imagination as they interpret its representational elements. Furthermore, McCloud's notion that icons demand participation corresponds with Murray's conception of computer interaction as fundamentally *participatory* (88). While Murray meant this in terms of the physical interactivity that computer operation demands, players also participate in games in their reading of audiovisual signs—whether in terms of function or interpretation. Worldbuilding through text and minimalist visuals can accentuate meaning in a manner that makes communication between a game and its player subjective and imaginative, yet still immediately present during gameplay. A videogame world that relies on these symbolic languages are therefore not only materially participatory, but mentally as well.

Undertale therefore makes a strong case against two claims often made in discussions of immersion: first, that self-reflexivity is necessarily antithetical to immersion; and secondly, that more realistic graphics facilitate deeper immersion. Unlike some other indie games that compensate for their smaller budgets with beautifully stylized 2D visuals, *Undertale*'s graphical style is also especially simple (you could even say bland)—yet its intense simplification draws the player's attention to meaningful variations in character design. Each character model is crucially unique and prevents players from perceiving the game's population of monsters as an impersonal multitude. The models of each of the game's characters look distinct, yet their iconic representation still allows the player to imaginatively participate in their characterizations. Furthermore, textual descriptions of monster behaviors during battle, or slight shifts in the characters' facial expressions in dialogue boxes, communicate all the player needs to know about their personality and tone. For example, the

character Sans' portrait is shown winking when he plays a joke or hints at his extradiegetic awareness of the presence of the player. The garbled sound bytes that play during a character's dialogue serve a similar purpose as they capture a unique voice to the character without imposing complete voice acting that would limit the player's imaginative engagement in the conversation. Ideally, *Undertale's* minimalist aesthetic can help make the player feel like they are developing personal relationships with its virtual characters. The use of a silent, gender-neutral, blank-faced avatar, among other visual opportunities for amplification through simplification, allows this imaginative engagement to feel personally constructed rather than representationally assigned.

Just like the ludic immersion that a player might feel when engaging in a challenging, yet fair, gameplay sequence—such as during the high intensity action of a *DOOM* game—narrative immersion can be facilitated through engaging imaginatively with iconic visuals. Andrew Hargadon conceives of immersion and engagement as opposed affective responses when interacting with any form of narrative: "Where immersion involves identification with characters and narrative elements—the local details that keep us involved even when we know the plot's trappings intimately—engagement involves deciphering the author's or game designers' intentions." For Hargadon, immersion in any media product is facilitated through recognizable narrative patterns, such as the tropes often repeated in works of popular fiction. The reader/viewer/player's recognition of these patterns enables an accessible reading process that frees the imagination to wander. By contrast, engagement is an attentive, mentally demanding reading process that involves searching for patterns of meaning not only

in narrative events but in structure, intertextual/intratextual references, and other aspects of close reading (Hargadon).

The reward for engagement is not that of satisfying immediacy but of taxing revisiting and rereading that expands possibilities for interpretation. Hargadon conceives of the ideal interplay between immersion and engagement as a state of *flow*, drawing on the concept coined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Like presence, flow is another word sometimes conflated with immersion. It is an optimal state of performance where the demands of a task are ideally balanced with the skill level of the individual undertaking it (Isbister 5). Ryan's idea of ludic immersion is thus connected with the flow state that can derive from gameplay challenges. In the context of gaming, Hargadon understands flow as:

> a condition where self-consciousness disappears, perceptions of time become distorted, and concentration becomes so intense that the game or task at hand completely absorbs us. Since flow involves extending our skills to cope with challenges, a sense that we are performing both well and effortlessly, this state hovers on the continuum between immersion and engagement, drawing on the characteristics of both simultaneously.

A player's flow state is maintained through a consistent level of challenge that is not excessive enough to frustrate the player out of their immersion. However, despite his productive attempt to conceive of immersion as working both separate from, and potentially alongside engagement, Hargadon has essentially introduced these new terms to conceive of immersion's inherent paradox. Flow's emphasis on well-balanced ludic challenge, meanwhile, operates separately from one's imaginative investment in the game world. To

conflate immersion and flow in this manner risks propagating a reductive view of the multiple modes of involvement players seek from videogames.

The demanding mental process of engagement need not be conceived as opposed to immersion; rather, the two can operate alongside one another to stimulate the player's investment across multiple aspects of gameplay. This focused and active form of immersion results in an oscillating movement from *within* the gameworld—for the player to willingly embrace and participate in its internal logic—to *without*, so that the player can read into the potential meanings established by the perceived interconnectivity across its audiovisual and ludic aspects. Calleja notes this necessary oscillation in his player involvement model. In the model, immersion is broken up into separate mental and physical demands that videogames place on players, including ludic, kinesthetic, spatial, shared [social], narrative, and affective (38). Psychologically, the player can only exert conscious effort towards one of these modes of involvement at a time, which will be determined by the focus of the game's content at any given moment as well as the player's own individual interest in these different facets of gameplay. In other words, the player learns to read meaning in the game's design, audiovisuality, and ludic elements alongside their understanding of a purely narrative meaning. *Undertale's* boss fights, which place players against the game's major monster characters, are strong examples where we see multiple of these modes of involvement together at play. In each *Undertale* battle, the player character's soul is represented as a heart within a small box. The player controls their soul to dodge enemy attacks, which enter into the box and are always unique to each individual monster. Learning to control the heart to dodge attacks is a mode of kinesthetic and ludic involvement. Some bosses will even change

the ways that the heart is controlled and thus require a kinesthetic reset. Character development occurs in the midst of these fights—often presenting the monsters as endearing, complex, and/or sympathetic—incorporating shared and narrative involvements into the gameplay. Finally, each fight is backgrounded with a distinct musical theme for the boss that contributes to its affective involvement. *Undertale's* boss fights thus try to holistically integrate multiple aspects of videogames' expressive capacities by pacing out the different modes of involvement they demand from the player.

As Calleja's model suggests, player immersion has too many facets to be reduced to a single focus or function. In her own discussion of immersion's multiple facets, Ryan explains that the problem with emotional investment in digital games comes from the functional split that occurs between many games' ludic and narrative purposes: "Whereas narrative interest regards characters as persons, ludic interest regards them as means to an end" ("From Narrative Games" 56). In an attempt to merge this functional doubling, *Undertale* makes each encounter with a monster an ethical choice, however black and white. The battle menu shows four options from left to right: Fight, Act, Item, Mercy. The cursor always begins on 'Fight,' thereby framing it as the default action as other RPGs tend to. With each encounter, the player is faced with the decision to either 'Fight' a monster until you kill it by repeating the command, or ensure that you end the encounter with the 'Spare' command (contained in the 'Mercy' sub-menu) by unlocking it. The ability to 'Spare' must be earned through effective use of 'Act' commands, which turns battles from a ludic digression to a key piece of the narrative. *Undertale*'s Act command is inherently social and using it throughout a pacifist playthrough of the game requires the player to observe the unique characterization of

each monster to appease them individually. Act requires the player to select one option out of a list of individual words that represent potential approaches towards social interaction. On the other hand, the default 'Fight' command—the main verb of most other RPG battles—involves the same impersonal timing-based challenge every time it is selected. *Undertale* is explicit about being a subversion of typical RPG design and tropes. Consequently, to grasp its full textual significance requires a metatextual engagement that simultaneously considers it as deconstructive plaything and immersive fantasy world. Rather than trivialize the diegesis of the game world, these dual aspects support each other thematically and implicate the player in a way that invests them further into playing the game and understanding their role within it.

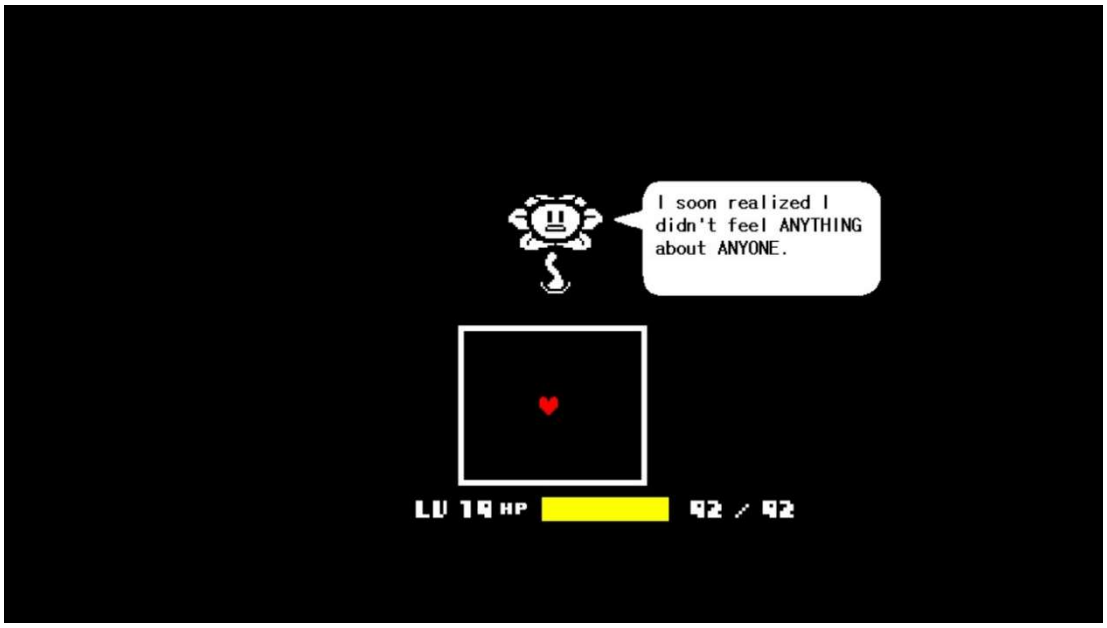
These paradoxical conditions of immersion mirror reader response theorist Wayne Booth's conceptualization of *the double figure of the reader-in-the-text*, which involves this paradox without naming it as such. For Booth, "the reader-in-the-text, at least when the text is what we call fictional, is *always* a double figure… [they are] *both* a credulous or 'pretending' person, and a doubter… who can pretend to believe and yet remember that they are pretending" (qtd. in Iser, "A Conversation" 245). The *doubled player-in-the-game*, as we can differentiate them, is put in a slightly more complex position than their literary equivalent due to the function of player interactivity and the aesthetics of agency. *Undertale* even thematizes this doubling through its ontological separation of Frisk (the player character's canonical name as revealed in one of the game's endings) and the name that the player selects for themself when initially starting the game. The game makes this explicit when it describes the avatar's perceptions in the second person ("you") throughout most of

the game and introduces the third person ("Frisk") during said ending's epilogue. Immersion, understood as an oscillation, requires the player to steadily navigate between these two subject positions of self and avatar.

Undertale's universe is comprised of many instantiations of seemingly illogical self-reflexivity, but it is a tone maintained consistently throughout the game. The self-reflexive elements (and the absurdity or metatextuality they rely on) become part of the world's *internal logic*. Through portraying an internally consistent world, even videogames with seemingly arbitrary diegetic elements can feel coherent and alive. A mimetic sense of realism is unimportant to immersion so long as there is coherence between "what [a game] is about as a game, and what it is about as a story" to avoid what designer Clint Hocking termed *ludonarrative dissonance*—where these ludic and narrative meanings oppose each other when attempting to interpret them holistically. *Undertale*'s minimalist presentation and narrative design deftly weave its self-reflexive and emotionally resonant tones together. In just the opening minutes of the game, the player is introduced to the character Flowey, a deceptively innocent-looking flower who openly taunts the player and tries to provoke them into causing harm to the game's characters. By giving Flowey the same omnipotent perspective as the player, the game establishes a parallel between the player and Flowey that also functions as a cautionary message. Flowey is villainized because of his emotionally detached perspective towards the game's world, making him incapable of sympathizing with any of the characters. Flowey, too, the game eventually reveals, used to 'play' *Undertale*, but once he began seeing the world as artificial (that is, solely as a game) he began to only take pleasure in committing violence to it. Flowey therefore represents a non-immersed player:

someone who is unable to connect with the game's fiction. If the player sees eye-to-eye with Flowey, they may take him up on his proposition to choose only 'Fight' in battle and thereby begin exterminating the world's monster population. Following this path leads to a unique ending where the player character kills every monster as the game's music becomes distorted and the world is emptied. This path is deliberately devoid of challenge and character interactions, and therefore the ludic reward of flow, since the player character necessarily becomes the strongest force in the world. The only anchor for immersion here is the opportunity to roleplay as a cruel and lonely evil that the game addresses metatextually as such. The ludic gameplay still supports the narrative themes, but in a way that defies traditional understandings of videogame enjoyment as flow-based. Finally, our avatar grows a will of their own and kills even Flowey, before turning on the player themself as the game crashes and ends. By featuring fourth-wall breaking characters like Flowey, as well as environmental jokes that call attention to the game's simplistic representations of objects, self-reflexivity becomes more than a means to insert humor or metacommentary; it becomes a thematic anchor for the narrative that works by acknowledging the player as both an omnipotent subject controlling the game and a character in the game's diegesis.

Figure 5. A Conversation with Undertale's Flowey



Flowey speaking directly to the player towards the end of the Genocide Route.

Aside from Flowey, the rest of *Undertale's* main cast is archetypal. Our recognition of the archetypal undertones to much of *Undertale*'s main cast should arguably trivialize our emotional attachment to them. For example, Toriel is an overbearing mother figure that the protagonist must (either violently or non-violently) push past to truly begin their quest, while Undyne is a heroic knight who wishes to protect her kingdom and friends at all costs. Hargadon notes that generic archetypes can sustain immersion due to the incorporation of *schemas*: recognizable and generic tropes that ease us into the text's imaginative world. He argues that such schemas and tropes "provide a detailed framework that frees us to focus intently on the minutiae of the narrative by providing us information about what, roughly, to expect from the characters, events, and plot generally, as well as, of course, its eventual outcome" (Hargadon). Despite the archetypal surfaces of the characters, however, the cast of

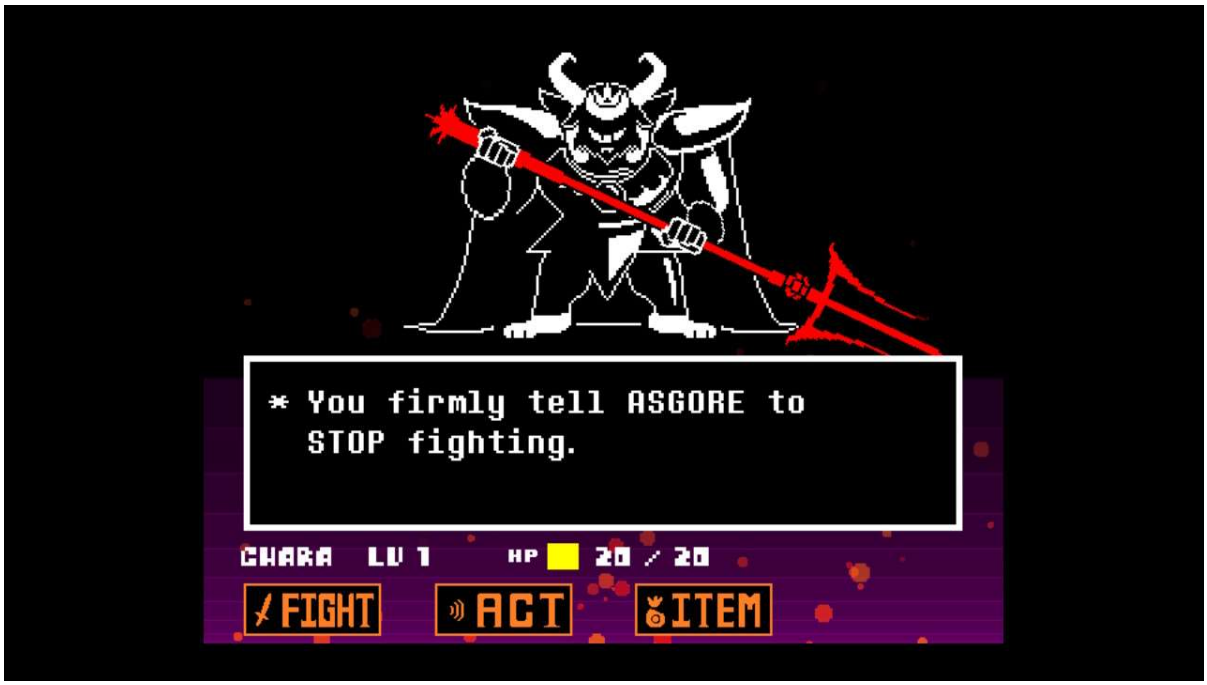
Undertale is conceived with a pastiche of references to older videogames and internet culture. Similar to the game's general subversion of violent RPG tropes, the characters also play into this subversion. For instance, the name 'Toriel' is a play on the word 'tutorial,' a meta reference that calls attention to how the character is imposed on the player at the beginning of the game to teach them self-evident rules. She even literally holds the player-character's hand through the first few rooms of puzzles. The absurd inclusion of puzzles throughout the game's world is itself addressed by the characters in a tongue-in-cheek nod to the non-diegetic inclusion of these ludic challenges. In *Undertale's* lore, monsters simply have an intrinsic urge to design puzzles all over their world.

At the same time, the archetypal characterizations of the cast are surmounted through their unique, iconic appearances, appropriately adhering to the self-reflexive logic of the world. Perhaps even more importantly, and with a crucial irony, these characters transcend their archetypes through their quirky personalities and the unique, fundamentally human concerns they each express. Toriel's dedication to protecting the innocent, Sans' existential laziness, and Papyrus' desperation for acceptance all help the game transcend a purely metatextual self-reflexivity and establish the game's essential emotional core: growing attached to a cast of odd-looking 8-bit monsters. *Undertale's* blend of archetypal characterizations and self-reflexive subversion of RPG tropes allows players to simultaneously immerse themselves in the schematized, yet emotionally compelling concerns of the world's characters, while also engaging with the world as an artificial construction full of intertextual references and replay value. Paired together with a variety of challenging boss fights that involve and develop these same characters, *Undertale* strikes a balance between

immersion and engagement through its natural marriage of ludic and narrative immersion. Sometimes, the game will call attention to its world's artifice while simultaneously trying to immerse players in a dramatic moment.

The boss fight against Asgore, the kind yet fearful king of the monsters, is one such example. Asgore begins the fight by breaking the 'Mercy' command in the player's menu. This brings the interface into the diegesis of the game world by demonstrating that Asgore is forcing the player into a violent confrontation. Yet, Asgore's reluctance to kill the human player character is represented visually and mechanically. His head is slightly bowed and his eyes obscured. He attacks with fireballs and his trident, but their animations show that they are thrown in the general direction of the player's soul rather than aimed directly at them. Trying to talk to Asgore through the 'Act' menu describes subtle reactions such as nervous changes in his breathing, although he does not respond and the player must ultimately Fight regardless of whether they would rather spare him. Through this fight, *Undertale* subverts even its own mechanical conventions to characterize Asgore and highlight a dramatically significant moment. In doing so, it also calls attention to how a videogame can immerse players emotionally and ludically while playfully calling attention to its own artificiality and engaging players into reading this shift in the game's design. Immersion in the Asgore fight comes from the game withholding what players likely desire—to talk it out—and having them imaginatively and ludically wrestle with that unexpected shift.

Figure 6. Boss Fight against Undertale's Asgore



The 'Mercy' command normally at the bottom-right of the screen is destroyed by Asgore.

Perhaps above all else, *Undertale* is about the relationship between a player and an RPG. It subverts the violent conventions of the genre to draw attention to what really matters for many players of such games: engaging encounters and an immersive narrative that allows the player to form bonds with interesting and likeable characters. *Undertale's* narrative premise even functions as a parable for playing such a game: a child falls into an alien fantasy world and must navigate a series of challenges before finishing the game. They can do so either by peacefully departing from or destroying the world. However, *Undertale* subverts this simple framework by presenting a peaceful world without a truly malevolent villain; that is, unless the player chooses to take this role upon themself. Even Flowey, who is introduced as the game's only explicitly malicious character, is revealed to be a pitiable

failed experiment left without a soul who becomes emotionally detached from the world because he, like a non-immersed player, experiences the world as an endlessly repeating game construct rather than a world rife with meaning. *Undertale*'s self-reflexive tendency to address the player directly strengthens the narrative impact of the game and makes it more than just an opportunity to form sentimental connections to fictional characters: it uses immersion to challenge the ways that a player might be conditioned to play such a game.

Undertale is not only an example of how metatextuality can become incorporated into a game's diegesis, but of how a fan community can extend their engagement with a game outside of playing it. In this sense, players build their sense of immersion—premised on their desire for such—whether present or not within the game world. Another facet of Calleja's player-involvement model is the distinction between *micro-involvement*, which includes "aspects of a game which engaged players in the moment of playing," and *macro-involvement*: "aspects that attracted players to the game initially and kept them returning to the game over time" (36-37). Fans of *Undertale* have been engaged in several macro-involvement activities, such as creating art or fan fiction of the characters spending time together (shared involvement), interpreting ambiguities and secrets not fully explained in the story (narrative involvement), and creating mods that build on the existing content of the game (ludic involvement). Each of these activities stems from the immersion players build from engagement with their micro, in-game counterparts and serve as examples of how players desire to extend that immersion beyond the confines of the digital screen. So long as the desire for immersion in a particular virtual world is activated, players can cultivate it outside of gameplay as well. *Undertale's* fanbase is just one prevalent example of this, but it

can also be seen in the communities of other popular games and series such as *Mass Effect* and *Final Fantasy VII*. Not only is immersion not a fully transportive movement of the subject from real to virtual space, but it can (seemingly paradoxically) be further cultivated through the player's creative engagements outside of playing the game.

The success of *Undertale's* paradoxical immersion demands a player who is both immersed within the game world and detached enough to rhetorically engage with and interpret the game's design and its metacommentary on the RPG genre. While immersion has become a loaded term with many connotations, its original conception as a complete mental passage from external reality to virtual reality is misinformed based on how players actually experience the multiple ludic and narrative demands of videogames. Furthermore, to consider representational, realistic graphics as somehow facilitating a stronger state of immersion than its technologically limited counterparts is similarly reductive. Immersion, understood as a multifaceted phenomenon that a player cultivates when they are invested in their own gameplay, is more complex and inherently unstable. A player who becomes attached to a certain game's world may want to feel present within that world, but the knowledge that it is only ever a transient experience is what makes the visit meaningful, enjoyable, and ripe for interpretive engagement that only strengthens the immersive connection. Immersion is a desire, and an inherently paradoxical one at that. A player's willing imaginative projections, whether facilitated by abstracted, iconic visuals or creative integration of text and UI, can provide a personal and rewarding engagement between player, avatar, and virtual world. The next section will consider how virtual worlds have never existed solely on the screen by demonstrating how immersion has both preceded yet been changed by the digital age.

1.6 The Actuality of Virtual Worlds

Despite immersion's often forward-looking connotations with advanced technology, the desire for immersion in fictional worlds precedes the digital age of the computer. This conception of immersion rooted in the imagination rather than sensory, technologically mediated experience has its roots in society's growing interest in fictional worlds throughout the 20th century. In *As If*, Michael Saler explores the postmodernist turn from *disenchantment* to *enchantment* around the fin-de-siècle using case studies such as the Sherlock Holmes universe, H.P. Lovecraft's mythos, and Tolkien's Middle Earth. These examples mark a sociocultural turn in modern Western society from readers simply engaging with imaginary worlds privately through the enjoyment of fictional texts towards an extended, communal, macro involvement with these universes that serves as the aesthetic origin for contemporary computerized virtual worlds. While communities have been immersing themselves fulsomely in fictional worlds since antiquity through Greek epics, Indigenous storytelling, and other global cultural traditions, this turn towards self-conscious enchantment in the 20th century set a new cultural standard for how contemporary fandoms engage with fiction. Saler describes how modern individuals became capable of exercising a simultaneously self-conscious and earnest *ironic imagination* through which fictional worlds can "provide safe and playful arenas for their inhabitants to reflect on the status of the real and to discuss prospects for effecting concrete personal and social changes" (Saler 7). This capacity can be referred to as a "double consciousness" that allows us to exist as multiple selves in multiple worlds simultaneously "without experiencing cognitive dissonance" (Saler 13). Contemporary virtual worlds have a dual nature: on one hand, they can provide an escapist space for

pleasure disconnected from the mundane world; on the other hand, they are thematically and experientially inextricable from engagements with the everyday world and self.

Inhabiting virtual worlds, whether digital or otherwise, works as an extension of mundane experience that empowers a self-reflexive and potentially reflective attitude. Saler notes how many practitioners of the ironic imagination become "more adept at accepting difference, contingency, and pluralism: at envisioning life not in essentialist, 'just so' terms but rather in provisional, 'as if' perspectives" (7). Modern enchantment, a historically situated form of fictional/narrative immersion, "enchants and disenchants simultaneously" as a thought experiment that does not threaten to delude those who engage in it (Saler 12). Unlike the Ancient Greeks, for instance, contemporary fandoms do not believe that the characters and settings of the worlds they immerse themselves through exist in the real world. At the same time, audiences can engage with these worlds *as if* they are, regarding them nonetheless as significant sources of personal and cultural meaning. Immersing oneself in a videogame universe—particularly one with a prominent investment in worldbuilding and/or avatar characterization—is just the most recent variation of this modern tradition. When filtered through a double consciousness, digital gameplay can offer a mirror through which the player reflects on the mundane world and the multiplicity of themself.

As I mentioned earlier, however, immersion became and has continued to be a phenomenon most directly attributed to digital technology. Murray attributes a computer's immersive potential to its *spatial* and *encyclopedic* properties, referring to their ability to present navigable virtual environments that can store large amounts of data organized in a non-linear fashion (89). This immersion also exists in a feedback loop with computers'

interactivity, divided between its *procedural* and *participatory* properties, which enable the users' sense of agency (Murray 89). In the context of an open-world RPG like Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, these properties are evident in the massive, geographically rich game world and the vast array of equipment, lore texts, and dialogue trees programmed into that world. Calleja also sees the immersion videogames can offer as technologically unique, locating this potential "within the ability of the system to recognize and react to the user's actions and spatial location" and insisting that extending the term "to cover presence in works of literature, film, or free-roaming imagination sidelines the core concern: the description and exploration of a phenomenon enabled by a specific technology" (22). The digitally embodied experiential aspect of being in a virtual world denotes a different kind of experience from that of literature and film through the technical quality of presence and the role of formal interactivity in cultivating fictional immersion.

Literary worlds like Middle Earth and the Sherlock Holmes universe may be virtual worlds in terms of how fans imaginatively engage with and form communities around them, but they differ from their computerized successors in terms of how they are inhabited. Part of this is the formal condition of presence that digital interaction entails. Like Saler, media scholar Beth Coleman explores the nebulous boundary between real and virtual worlds. Unlike Saler, however, Coleman's ideas are based around the recent emergence of the "network age," which she proclaims as the successor to the computer age. The currently unfolding network age is defined by humans' pervasive media use, which bridges the gap between virtual and real spaces in a more literal sense than what Saler discusses. She calls this threshold space the "actual" or "X-Reality," which is based on the reality of our

everyday exposure to network technology and refers to "sites of engagement that are neither real nor virtual but spanning territories" (38). Pervasive media use is perhaps best exemplified by how social media users interact on different online platforms everyday through their smart phones. Each of these users' social media accounts are in a sense ontologically distinct 'avatars' that can come to represent different aspects of one's self while simultaneously serving as a willful attempt to consolidate a stable identity. Each avatar in its own way reflects the "'me' I think I am" for the "power of identity in a network culture… rests in the power of self-transformation" (Coleman 110). In this context, the purpose of creating and embodying avatars is not an act of escaping from oneself but an attempt at self-understanding and an integrated form of being and becoming.

Humans have been engaging with virtual worlds since fictional storytelling has been entrenched in culture, but conceiving of our selves in this avatarial relation is a distinct emergence of the network age. Bob Rehak defines the *avatarial relation* in the context of videogames, wherein the player willingly inverts "self-other distinctions" and invests "an acted-on object with the characteristics of an acting subject… [while] contradictions in self-image opened by the avatar must be reconciled as part of the game's process" (Rehak 107-108). Gameplay and social media use both create an unstable dialectic between user/player and avatar that puts the subject in the simultaneous position of spectatorship and participation. When I play as Cecil Harvey in *Final Fantasy IV*, I am both a participant in shaping his story and a spectator of the story designed into the game. Similarly, if I use a Twitter account, I am both a participant in the online discourses I post about and a spectator of said discourses as I have become integrated into them as part of a web of other users.

Coleman sums it up thus: "there is no second, virtual life—a cyberspace outside of our actual space of engagement. Rather, there are only variations of avatars as one moves through different territories. Actual things happen across a continuum of space, place, and temporality. And, the insights and actions we take in these sites may change our minds or even our worldviews" (71). What makes these forms of avatar-mediated communication novel is that there is a material split between the avatar as an objectively represented being on a screen and the fluid, subjective being who interacts and conceives of themselves in relation to that avatar (i.e. the user or player). Within this split lies the potential for the subject to reflect on themselves based on the observable interactions they made as their avatar(s).

Coleman's network-based virtual worlds become a seamless aspect of mundane daily life, which differs from Saler's purely fictional engagements, but both writers help make sense of the ways that fiction and technology mediate everyday experience. Different types of videogames fit in different parts of this spectrum between pure fiction and technologically mediated reality, with single-player narrative-driven games like *Undertale* falling closer to the former and MMOs like *World of Warcraft* approaching the latter. Both Coleman and Saler believe that engagements with virtual worlds become most meaningful when they are based around a community. Coleman is interested in "how people make use of the emergent networked channels to support a self-conception of agency," which involves the willful use of these technologies to shape a self-determined context of action (37-38). Drawing on the logic of Marshall McLuhan, Coleman believes that we are all impacted by pervasive media technologies whether we engage with them or not because they reconfigure our social

conditions. However, Coleman rejects McLuhan's implication that we are passive recipients of these effects. Her concept of network-based agency suggests that users have the ability to treat one's interactions with virtual worlds as simultaneously experimental and fluid without presuming a pre-determined consequence. While interacting with these technologies inevitably affects users, we have the capacity to determine how we interact with them and towards what ends.

Coleman differentiates this pervasive use from the more overtly demarcated "walled garden" fantasies of single-player videogames and offline virtual worlds "where real-world rules and consequences do not come into play… a hermetic space that is not influenced by external factors" (58). Yet, can these offline worlds not be similarly 'actual' in the sense that one approaches, interacts, and interprets them according to one's own desires, expectations, and prior experiences? Moreover, are online virtual worlds like *Second Life* (Coleman's primary case study) not similarly fictional in that users experiment with new identities in a constructed context defined by the digital platform? Through the ironic imagination and the desire for immersive experiences that extend oneself into virtual worlds, there seems to be no clear grounds for excluding even solitary engagements with virtual worlds from the threshold space of actuality. They are similarly embodied as experiences and reflective of a decentered posthuman identity. This is, essentially, what Murray meant when she originally discussed immersion as a technologically facilitated narrative phenomenon. Virtual reality technology may not have advanced to provide a seamless holodeck-like experience, but that hasn't mattered. The immersive desire still informs the way many players engage with videogames narratively, the way we project into and are co-determined by our virtual worlds and avatars,

and the novel way we engage with our selves through digital technology in this current networked era.

In the next section, I'll further advance this concept by integrating Coleman's understanding of network-based agency with a theoretical conception of player agency that informs how players' sense of meaningful interaction contributes to their sense of immersion and thus opens a space for self-reflection and subject formation. I will ground these ideas in an analysis of the experimental and existential RPG, *Disco Elysium*.

1.7 Reconceiving Player Agency with *Disco Elysium*

To further elucidate the unique experience of videogame immersion, while accounting for both its ludic and narrative components, I will consider its interplay with agency. Murray theorizes *immersion* and *agency* as the principal aesthetics of digital narratives. While immersion is based on the sense that one feels present within the virtual world, agency "is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (Murray 159). Furthermore, the two aesthetics are essentially connected in how they build off each other in supporting a narratively compelling gameplay experience: **"**When we are immersed in a consistent environment we are motivated to initiate actions that lead to the feeling of agency, which in turn deepens our sense of immersion. This phenomenon can be thought of as the **'**Active Creation of Belief'" (Murray 114). Unlike Coleridge's original conception of the suspension of disbelief, where the reader of a linear narrative submits to the truth of its fiction, the active creation of belief demanded by games invokes the participatory

and involving nature of computer interaction in the context of the nonlinear structure of videogames and the virtual experience they provide:

> When we enter a fictional world, we do not merely 'suspend' a critical faculty; we also exercise a creative faculty. We do not suspend disbelief so much as we actively *create belief.* Because of our desire to experience immersion, we focus our attention on the enveloping world and we use our intelligence to reinforce rather than to question the reality of the experience (Murray 136).

As tied to player immersion, then, agency is a mental as well as physical creative phenomenon. The player takes on an active role in producing the game's narrative through the material activity of playing the game. In *Undertale*, for instance, this can be clearly exhibited in the player's decision to either Spare monsters and join their community or Fight them and cultivate a more dystopian narrative experience. This spatial enactment of narrative works in tandem with the player's imaginative roleplaying of their avatar, with both elements enriching the narrative potential of gameplay. The active role that the player takes on in progressing through a game's structure, imaginatively roleplaying as an avatar, and in interpreting their gameplay as a coherent narrative experience creates game narrative as such. In other words, without the complementary variable of a player's agency, a game's narrative does not exist. We'd be left with only the code and representational elements that serve as the material for its construction through the activity of gameplay. While any artistic text requires subject interaction that imparts it with meaning—whether it be a painting, poem, movie, etc.—digital games require the subject to act in order for the text to materialize. After all, a

player does not engage with the raw materials of the game, such as its code and assets, but rather the gameplay that hides this material, which they are given the pleasure of actualizing.

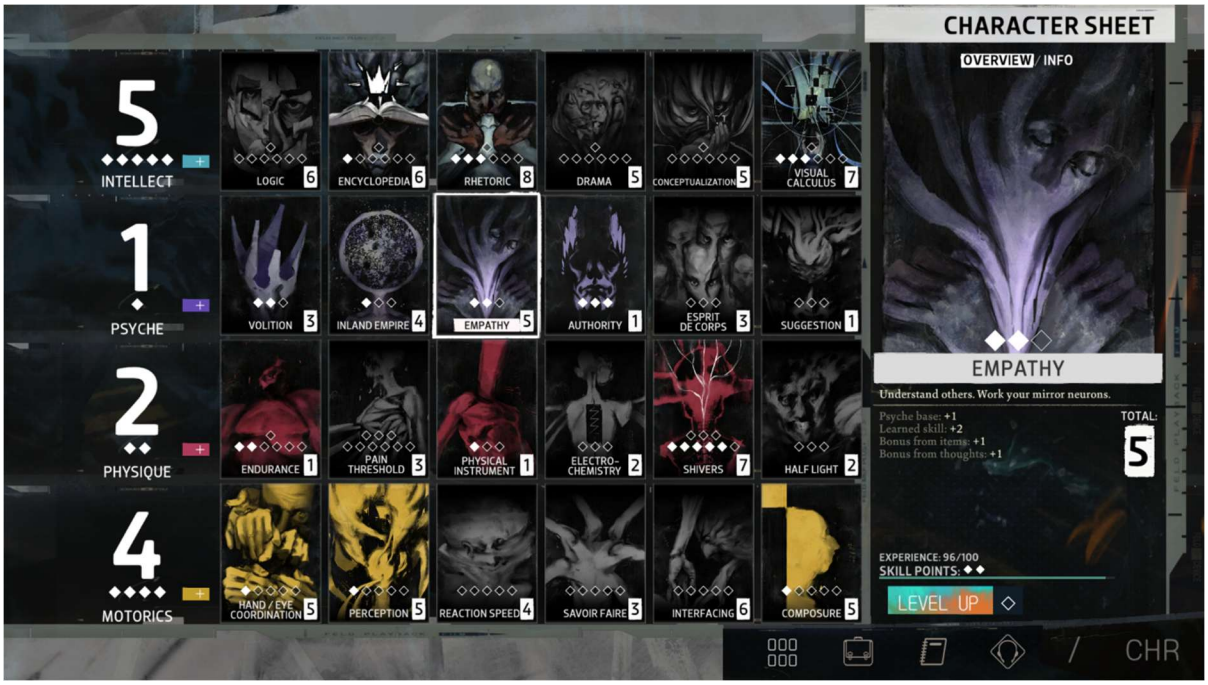
The concept of agency in videogames gets most readily applied to Western role-playing games (WRPGs) because the genre is often characterized by multilinear plots offering players branching paths for progression, and thereby emphasize tangible narrative results for the choices players make. These choices are most often presented in conversation trees when the player's avatar is interacting with a non-player character (NPC), through which the player is prompted to select either a line of dialogue or an action from a list of options to proceed the game and enact narrative. Agency in these games is thus most visibly expressed through which NPCs the player chooses to interact with, when, and how. ZA/UM's *Disco Elysium* is a WRPG whose gameplay is based almost solely around such NPC interactions and demonstrates the extent to which often seemingly miniscule choices can result in a unique and personal narrative experience for the player. Game studies scholars since Murray, such as Sarah Stang, have backpedalled on Murray's idealized conception of agency by stressing that the heavily designed nature of videogames necessarily imposes limited affordances for the player, making interactivity (and thus agency) a mere illusion ("This Action"). However, Stang's argument that "videogame interactivity is something we feel rather than something we observe" could be regarded as complementary rather than oppositional to Murray's definition ("This Action"). Indeed, it is precisely this mere *feeling* of agency that *Disco Elysium* leverages through affording the player constant micro-decisions that are often useless for progression, yet central to player expression and emergent narrative. At the same time, *Disco Elysium's* unique roleplaying mechanics and representation of its protagonist's

internal thought processes call into question just how much agency any individual really has over their decisions—without undercutting the legitimacy of the feelings that expressing such agency might produce.

Like many WRPGs, *Disco Elysium's* first opportunity for player agency comes in character creation; and, like many other WRPGs, character creation is primarily handled through distributing points into Attributes and Skills. Where *Disco Elysium* differs is how Attributes and Skills are represented and the purpose they serve in gameplay. Attributes are divided into four categories of mental and physical constitution (Intellect, Psyche, Physique, Motorics) and each contain six corresponding skills for engaging with the world and people (e.g. Psyche includes skills such as Empathy and Authority, while Motorics includes Perception and Hand/Eye Coordination among others). The game's protagonist and player avatar, Harry DuBois, is not a mere blank slate for the player to shape but a character with a complex history—albeit one that is initially hidden from the player as, immediately prior to the game's beginning, Harry completely loses his memory of the world as well as his personal history after a (literally) self-destructive bender. The player's agency, then, from the moment of character creation begins to determine what Harry will become after finding himself in this state of total amnesia as he slowly begins relearning his and the world's history by talking with NPCs. The central constraint on the player and hook of the plot is that Harry is a detective in charge of solving a murder case that has already begun, which the player can try doing (or avoiding to do) in a number of ways depending on their primary Skills and Attributes. The game thus encourages roleplaying—an imaginative agency—by not having an 'optimal' way to build Harry, but rather making experimentation the main

draw of the game. Different stat distributions will open up certain doors of progression while closing off others, making failures an integrated part of the gameplay experience rather than leading to a fail state that requires reloading the game.

Figure 7. Character stat growth in Disco Elysium



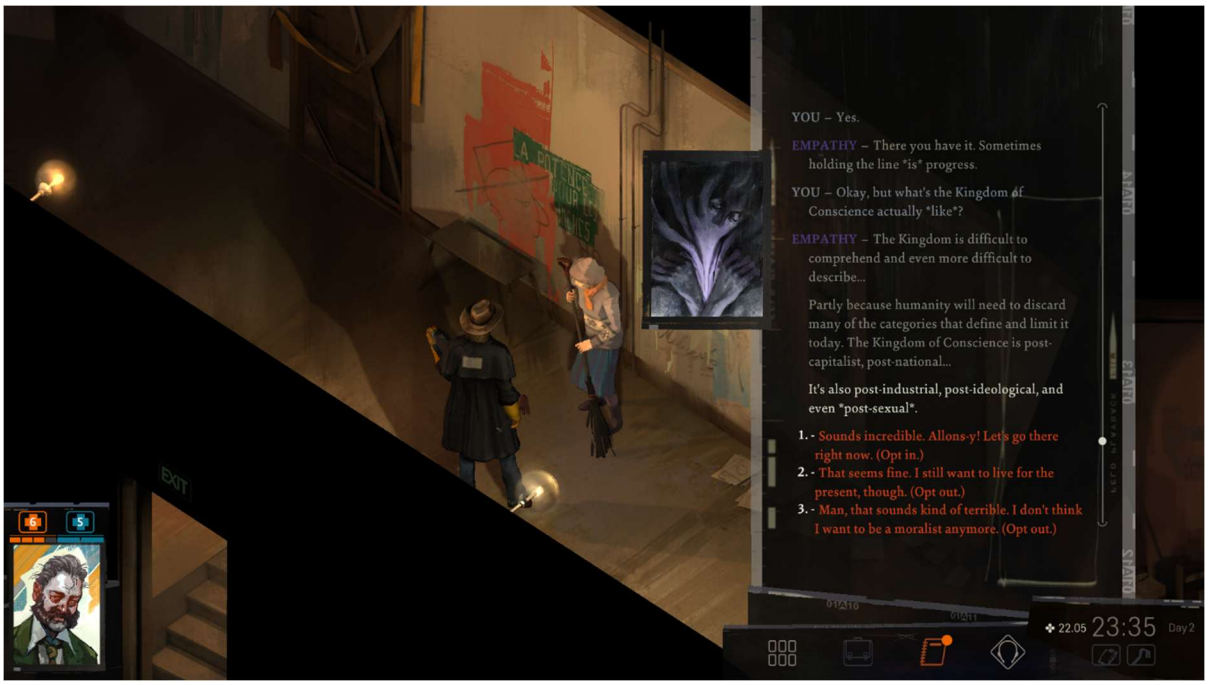
Agency in this sense becomes more about player expression than providing empowering decisions that drastically change the game world. In *Cybertext*, Espen Aarseth divides player decisions (or "keyholes," as he calls them) into "two different functional kinds: those that advance the strategic position of the player and those that don't**.** Only the first are gaps in the quest for the solution of the game, but on a 'narrative' level there is no discernible difference" (111). The nonlinear nature of gameplay within the fixed bounds of design necessarily distinguishes 'useful' versus 'useless' interaction in games, meaning the player's attempts to exert agency can either lead to progressing the game (i.e. leading closer

to the ending) or a simple detour from doing so. Yet, although both are not equal in terms of gameplay functionality, they are equal in terms of narrative functionality. *Disco Elysium* underscores and undermines this difference by making many of the 'quests' the player can choose to undertake deliberate detours from the main murder plot. One of these threads the player can take up has Harry helping a pair of cryptozoologists try to track down an elusive insect, resulting in a version of Harry that is unusually fixated on the matter. Another optional quest line has Harry trying to help a group of speed-fuelled "anodic dance music" loving youth set up a club in an abandoned church. Although the events that take part during these quests do not necessarily bring the player closer to solving the main plot, their events remain essential to the story of Harry that is being shaped out of the player's actions. What these 'useless' quests provide is various opportunities for the player to work on their Active Creation of Belief as they interact with more NPCs and continue to shape Harry as a character they can immerse themself through.

A game's roleplaying affordances are tied to its mechanics, and the way these mechanics are represented in-game help the player attribute meaning to their gameplay. In *Persuasive Games*, Ian Bogost argues that a videogame's meaning as a virtual simulation is tied to its use of *procedural representation*, which selectively "models only some subset of a source system, in order to draw attention to that portion as the subject of the representation. Interactivity follows suit: the total number and credibility of user actions is not necessarily important; rather, the relevance of the interaction in the context of the representational goals of the system is paramount" (46). The 'system' that *Disco Elysium* models through its mechanics is the human mind/body connection. Depending on which Skills the player has

invested the most points in, those skills will more frequently insert themselves during conversations with the world's citizens as characters—each with their own personalities and fixations—that exist only to Harry, yet whose presence and influence are as prominent as the people in his external reality. The game, through its procedural representation of internal conversation, puts forth an argument about how our agency as human beings is structured by our personalities. Our self is not a stable, singular subject but a chaotic multitude of personality attributes (and their stray thoughts) engaging each other and influencing us. Yes, the game affords the traditional conversation tree selections that many WRPGs do to simulate player agency; yet, the manner in which these personality traits insert themselves into conversation inevitably compete for influencing the player's next decision(s). When engaging with an NPC, will the player listen to the reasoning voice of their Logic, the primordial fight-or-flight impulses of Half-Light, or perhaps the emotional appeals of Empathy? By characterizing this chorus of internal voices, *Disco Elysium* puts forth an argument for how consciousness thinks and how it structures and perhaps even determines the agency of the self. Through its systems, the game represents internal processes and corporeal sensations of our avatar that would otherwise be happening exclusively in the player's mind as they imaginatively engage with the game's fiction. This representation of interiority shows the frayed nature of the self and its impacts on one's sense of agency. This thus proves not only to be an intriguing narrative system but a metacommentary on agency—within a game or outside of one.

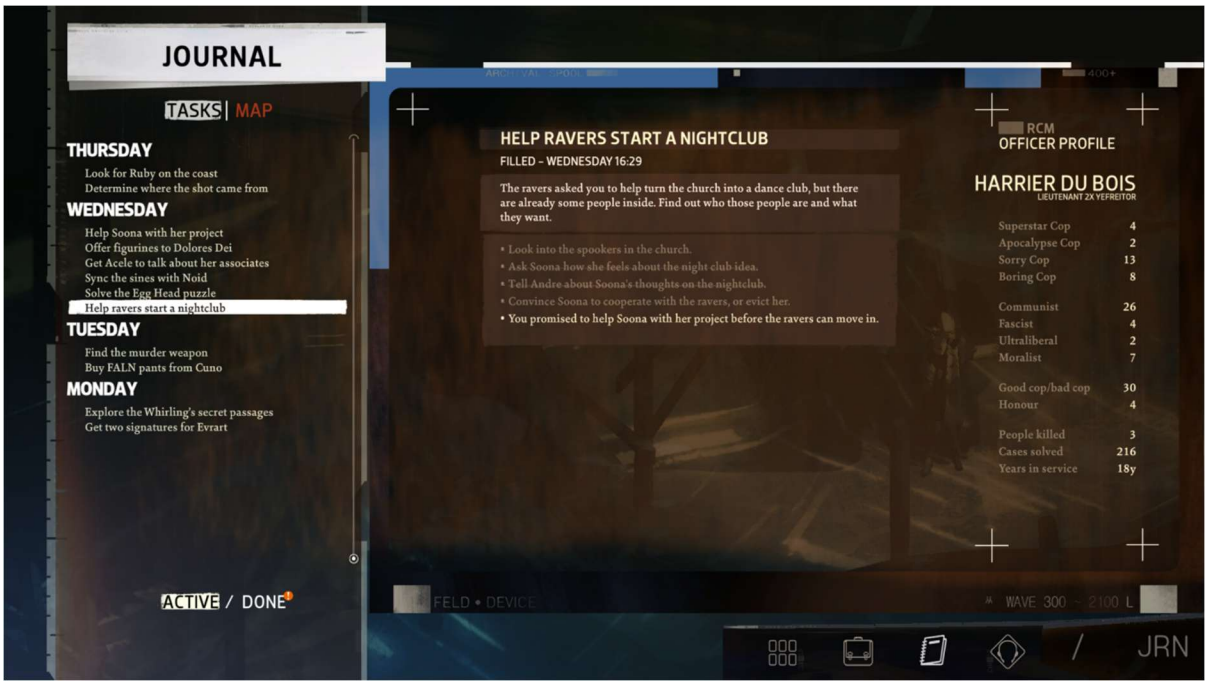
Figure 8. An Ideological Push from Empathy in Disco Elysium



In most discussions surrounding agency in games, the term is used solely to refer to the player's diegetic decisions and their impacts on a game world. Yet the range of open-ended roleplaying affordances *Disco Elysium* grants, paired with how it tracks and represents choices, also invites players to reflect on their gameplay. In this sense, Harry functions as a fictional mirror reflective of each player's individual subjectivity as it informs and co-creates the narrative of play. Agency in videogames need not only account for what we do *in* a game world, but what we do *with* the subjective meaning that emerges from our experiences with it. Coleman considers how the concept of agency takes on a new meaning in the network age's X-Reality based around the material reality of our everyday exposure to network technology and its effects on our lived experience and psyche (38). While *Disco Elysium* is a single-player digital game with no online components, Coleman's theory about the

dissolution of boundaries between the virtual and real into the actual—and its implications on avatars as vessels for user agency—can be extended even to experiences in offline virtual worlds. *Disco Elysium* relies on typical character building and conversation systems found in RPGs, but by tying the former to real political ideologies (including a counter for fascist, communist, moralist, or ultraliberal decisions made by the player) and the latter to internal conversations with personality traits, the player not only exercises agency diegetically in the shaping of Harry, our avatar, but are primed for a reflection on how the character we shape (and his personality/views) differ from or reflect our own. The game encourages such reflection not only mechanically, by associating particular decisions with ideologies or the type of "cop" Harry is becoming (e.g. a straight-edge Boring Cop, or a delusional Superstar Cop), but narratively in key moments where the game confronts the player in terms of the choices they have made and the person Harry has become.

Figure 9. Disco Elysium's Journal



The right-side of the Journal screen tracks the player's choices and how they are shaping their version of Harry.

The sum of the player's decisions can lead to some different outcomes in *Disco Elysium's* final act, but I'd argue that the most rewarding part of the game and the sense of agency it imparts does not stem from the plot's conclusion but from the experience of roleplaying as a version of Harry that becomes one's own—and the opportunity for reflection this opens up. What skills did you invest the most into? What thoughts/discourses did you internalize? What political ideology did you accrue the most points in? Seen as part of a continuum between real and virtual experiences, the agency a player exerts in *Disco Elysium* and the material results it reflects through procedural representation can come to have an *actual* impact on the player and their own sense of self. As Coleman specifies, "avatar

identity works within a space of the actual as an X-reality phenomenon. We are in effect, neither purely role playing (pretending to be someone else), nor are we left untouched by our engagement of a persona" (76). The feedback loop between immersion and agency that Murray describes in the Active Creation of Belief thus constitutes a digital narrative phenomenon where the player creatively invests themselves in their engagements with a fictional virtual world—a practice where even a mere feeling of virtual agency can produce a genuine reflective response. This follows Eskelinen's suggestion that interpretation in games is both an extra-diegetic engagement with mechanics and a diegetic engagement with narrative, both of which players engage with fluidly during gameplay. The practice of how players interpret their own gameplay textually will be elaborated upon in Section 3.

In the final part of Section 1, I will explore how immersion and the personal meanings that can stem from its pursuit are the product of a unique type of subjectivity cultivated by the player's presence in a virtual world. I will do this through a discussion of virtual subjectivity contextualized through a research-creation project that attempts to use gameplay capturing technologies to facilitate the self-reflection described above based on embodied virtual experiences.

1.8 Materializing Virtual Subjectivity through Creative Misuse of Gameplay Capturing Technology

This section's research creation project is built upon the idea that videogame players can use the gameplay capturing features built into today's hardware to materialize and reflect on their digital narrative experiences. The resulting practice applies an automedial (Moser) approach to autofictional writing where I immerse myself in the fictional worlds of videogames and

investigate the affordances of capturing, observing, and reflecting on my gameplay. This sort of creative, personalized engagement with one's own gameplay forces players to draw meaning out of fleeting virtual experiences that could otherwise be consumed in a state of thoughtless immersion—that is, as pure entertainment. I propose that players can use their sense of immersion, understood as their fictional investment and sense of presence in a game world, retroactively to treat a virtual experience as potentially meaningful to their understanding of themselves or the world. As a case study for these ideas, I have drawn on my experiences and recordings playing Square Enix's role-playing game (RPG), *Dragon Quest XI: Echoes of an Elusive Age* (*DQXI*) and Platinum Games' action-RPG, *NieR: Automata*. This project aims to subvert the regular, commercialized consumption of videogames by taking the player's engagement with the game's fiction outside the bounds of the virtual space itself to slowly and thoughtfully infuse the experience with subjective meaning. In this sense, the project is based on what Jason Farman calls the "creative misuse" of gameplay capturing technology, in that it uses the "technology in a way in which it was never meant to be used, the results of which offer a thoroughly transformed view of the technology, its place in society, and future practices with the technology" (4). While this technology is most ubiquitously used for players to entertain viewers on streaming services such as *Twitch*—often with the goal of amassing followers and potentially making profit—I propose that it can alternatively be used as a means for personal reflection that may help a player learn more about their unique relationship with the games that they enjoy.

Twitch is often based around users streaming their gameplay while providing live commentary and reactions meant to entertain viewers. As a result of the performative nature

of the platform, there is usually little room for the streamer to meaningfully reflects on the connection between themselves and their object. In his study of automediality, Christian Moser notes how the digital selves cultivated on such platforms "are performative, exhaustive and expository in character" in that they "compete for attention and recognition among users" as a form of techno-capitalist exchange (257). Similarly, Christine Tran notes how streamers "are tasked to deftly negotiate a precarious equilibrium between performative self-expression and judicious restraint," an often-invisible dynamic and form of labour that is especially demanding for marginalized creators "within a historically inhospitable gaming milieu" (2282). In this sense, seeking success on platforms like Twitch demands that streamers engage in a self-conscious process of establishing a personalized 'brand' identity that will attract and retain a particular group of followers. While the live nature of streaming helps project a sense of authenticity that can be truly spontaneous and compellingly self-revealing, "those performances are still displays, even if they are expressions of what we think of as our 'true' selves, our real interests, and genuine interactions with others" (Consalvo et al. 68). The creative misuse I experiment with here considers how the product of gameplay capturing technology can be repurposed in an offline, solitary context, and the different type of authentic reflection on oneself it affords.

For philosopher Keiji Nishitani, the type of self-conscious cultivation of identity creators perform on Twitch leads to an ignorance that only obfuscates one's understanding of their true self. The true self, Nishitani argues, eludes self-consciousness. It can only be realized through a communion with other things in which the thinking subject (or, ego) forgets itself:

> we can get in touch with ourselves only through a mode of being that puts us in touch with things from the very midst of those things themselves… the self is ever against itself, as some *thing* called 'self' and separated from other things. This is the self of self-consciousness, wherein a representation of the self in the shape of some 'thing' or other is always intervening, keeping the self from being really and truly on its own home-ground. (10)

Nishitani believes that the mode of being associated with *play* is a means through which being, doing, and becoming merge effortlessly and thus allow the human self to escape self-consciousness. Play is a mode of being rooted in the present, and "there is no more unrestricted, take-things-as-they-come sort of play than the emergence of self into its nature from non-ego; and, at the same time, there is nothing more serious and earnest" (257). Because playing a game is a task that lies outside the bounds of social responsibility, the work it provides is inherently playful. It is a task detached from objective reality and, therefore, avoids that reality's impositions and illusions towards self-expression. By engaging creatively and earnestly with one's own gameplay experiences, a player opens themselves up to a means of self-reflection without filtering the experiences through the self-conscious social media platforms they are usually shared on.

In this sense, we can understand how our experiences (virtual or otherwise) become altered through any mediations we filter them through. At the end of "Remediation," Bolter and Grusin conclude: "Instead of trying to be in the presence of the objects of representation, the subject now defines immediacy as being in the presence of media. In this remediation of the self, the fascination with media functions as the sublimation of the initial desire for

immediacy, the desire to be present to oneself" (356). *Twitch* provides a good example of this phenomenon, as it revealed that many people with an interest in videogames enjoy experiencing them vicariously through an explicitly hypermediated format in which a streamer's gameplay is supplemented by footage of the streamer themselves and a text chat connecting viewers together. In order to reach their conclusion, Bolter and Grusin first unpack the impossibility of the notion of true immediacy (or immersion)—that is, an experience of media "in which objects of representation are felt to be self-present" and thus deny mediation—yet a videogame need not achieve this effect for its fiction to impact the player (355). Since the time of Bolter and Grusin's writing, single-player games have evolved to include ever more complex narratives and representations of spaces so that even as players remain aware that they are interacting with a mediated world, a sustained, solitary engagement with the game can still provide a degree of immersion in which the player loses themselves in play. In this process, the player subject and game object productively comingle. However, without a deliberate attempt by the player to engage with their own gameplay retroactively, these virtual experiences can easily dissolve into temporary, escapist entertainment, rather than being internalized as part of the self's becoming.

The literal incorporation of the videogame player into the virtual space involves a reconfiguration of self according to the fictional context and set of rules that now structure their experience. In this sense, experiences in virtual worlds can allow for self-discovery, not as a detached alternative to the real world, but as "new existential domains which are intertwined and overlapping with (and depend on) our being in the actual world" (Leino viii). Gualeni and Vella explore this existential project through their concept of *virtual subjectivity*,

"the subjective sense of 'self' that relates to one's being-in-the-virtual-world… standing in a nested relation to the individual's subjectivity in the actual world" (xxi). Importantly, this virtual subjectivity is not an a priori condition of playing videogames but a result of approaching one's gameplay as an "existential project" based on "the aspiration to be in a particular way—to be a certain kind of subject" and derive meaning from experiencing the virtual world's events and interactions from that hybrid subject position (Gualeni and Vella 2). In this sense, virtual subjectivity is an adopted stance towards a game world that stems from the player's desire for immersion—a desire for the experience to be more than a simple game with goals to complete in the sense of flow. Virtual subjectivity is subordinate to actual subjectivity, operating as an extension of it. Like all human extensions, it finds its meaning in the development of the human being as such in the embodied threshold space of the actual: "the existential structures that we can develop and establish in virtual worlds are ultimately meaningful and valuable only insofar as they accrue meaning and value within the projectual structures of the individual's existence in the actual world" (Gualeni and Vella 9-10). The meaning of an immersive experience in a virtual world stems from the results of game developers' choices yet depends on its rootedness in the player's actuality to be integrated as part of the self's existential project.

Through virtual subjectivity, Gualeni and Vella attempt to advance a phenomenological understanding of videogames as an existential project—how players come to derive meaning from them as actual, embodied experiences. Keogh is similarly interested in the phenomenology of videogame experience as embodied, yet his work is more focused on the material composition of the videogame than its conscious interpretation as meaningful

by the player. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, Keogh advocates for a synthesized appreciation of videogames' multiple remediated properties—its audiovisual-haptic design, hardware, and the player's body—as *embodied textuality*:

> that videogames can be studied as texts, but only if our notion of what a text is takes into account the material instantiation through which that text is embodied… The player's embodied engagement with the material form of the videogame precedes any interpretative engagement with the videogame's virtual "content," even—especially—when that material engagement is not given the player's conscious attention. (ch. 1)

Yet, even though embodied engagement precedes interpretive engagement, a consideration of how the two support each other is key to defining the multiple processes that make up player experience. As Nguyen notes, the player subject's striving towards this aesthetic experience is fundamentally rooted in what the game presents: "the game directs us to perform an activity and then prescribes that we appreciate the aesthetic qualities of our own activity—of our own motion, our analytical abilities, and our capacities for assessment and choice" (Nguyen 433). Embodied textuality and virtual subjectivity are two sides of the same theoretical coin for a phenomenology of player experience. The former encompasses the pre-conscious meaning of gameplay as materially instantiated while the latter involves the conscious construction of meaning that a player attaches to their gameplay.

In this sense, videogames express meaning in two ways. Firstly, there is the meaning of the videogame as multimedia presentation. I avoid the word representation here due to the

word's mimetic and ultimately narrative connotations, which does not yet factor into this pre-conscious experience. In her discussion of textual materiality, Johanna Drucker defines the *presentational* as "that order of visual and verbal manifestation which claims to bring something into being in its making, rather than to serve to represent an already extant idea, form, thought, or thing" (59). The materiality of the game-as-played presents itself to the player as a holistic perceptual experience constituted by the primordial feel of the player's actions as they press buttons and see their effects represented on screen as a perceptual collage of sights, sounds, and haptics. The feedback loop and incorporation of the player into this sensory experience is inherently playful and precedes any representational intent or conscious, self-reflective thought on the experience. This is an elemental form of meaning that derives intrinsically from being-in-the-virtual-world (Keogh ch 1). The second way that videogames express meaning is narratively through fictional representation and subjective reflection. This meaning must be actively, consciously constructed and interprets the videogame's audiovisual-haptic presentation into a representational experience that the player perceives as significant. Both are key aspects for interpreting an immersive experience.

Through a combination of creative practice and theory, this project aims to exemplify how this comingling of subject and object takes effect when a player engages imaginatively and thoughtfully with the fictional world of a game—both during and after play. In this sense, reflecting meaningfully on one's gameplay relies on both an immediate (or playfully immersed) *and* hypermediate (or thoughtfully self-conscious) engagement with the game. Moser discusses how the "specific media used for encoding memories inflect the form of the

self-representation that makes use of them and therefore contributes to shaping the subject that evolves through this practice" (248). To engage with the self through videogames, the player must first be immersed during the course of gameplay and then retroactively reflect on that experience.

The results of the project are documented in the dissertation's Appendix A. In the process of preparing this project, I took periodic screenshots during my gameplay of *DQXI* and *NieR: Automata* at moments that felt impactful to me. After each game's completion, I was left with a photo album that provided a chronological archive documenting not only fragments of the games' narrative progression, but a reminder of what moments struck me as particularly interesting. Not only does using photographic media to document the more spatially oriented medium of videogames help materialize a virtual experience, but through personal use it captures the contingent nature of gameplay that makes each player's playthrough something unique and personal. Gordan Calleja tellingly refers to this irreducible aspect of individual gameplay as constituting an *alterbiography*. He defines this as the unique "story generated by the individual player as she takes action in the game" at a particular time and place, which can be contrasted to the embedded narrative material in the game (Calleja 115). The selective process of the image-based gameplay reflections I used here necessitates that the player already begins reflecting on what about the game struck them as particularly meaningful. I felt video footage was less suitable to this project because it presents a complete experience that does not necessarily require supplementary commentary from its player. It can speak for itself. Moreover, while video footage provides a

complete, objective recording of gameplay experience, engagement with screenshots requires a subjective recreation of the player's experiences through memory.

After selecting a set of screenshots from both games, I narrativized my experience with each in a brief caption, presenting them linearly as a progression through the initial sections of the games. My approach to these captions was inspired by Italo Calvino's written snapshots of the fictional cities portrayed in his experimental novel, *Invisible Cities*. I regarded Calvino's work as an enlightening precedent that showcases the real human value that can be derived from a sustained mental engagement with imaginary places. The fragmented structure of *Invisible Cities'* individual segments and its narrator's focus on fleshing out space rather than plot or characters make its style ripe for application to virtual worlds. Most importantly, this Calvino-inspired approach resists the performative and self-conscious content creation usually seen on media sharing platforms in favor of a creative and reflectively embodied practice through which a player can briefly disengage from self-consciousness through a personal and earnest narrativization of virtual experience that is mediated by their fictional avatar.

Much like Calvino's descriptions are filtered through his fictional characterization of Marco Polo, I decided to present my gameplay reflections as if written from the perspective of each game's protagonist: the silent, mythical, and unceasingly heroic Luminary of *DQXI*; and *NieR's* cold yet uncannily human combat android, 2B. Both characters occupy a defamiliarizing ontological ground that the player must navigate in identifying with them. For example, because the Luminary expresses almost no subjectivity of his own, my writing from his perspective was inevitably coloured by my own subjectivity filtered through his

mythical role in his world, Erdrea. On the other hand, playing as 2B asks the player to embody a posthuman 'other' whose defamiliarized perspective on a postapocalyptic Earth challenges the player to think outside of purely human terms while offering a different ontological position by which to contemplate the nature of humanity. This contrast reveals the extent to which the characterization of the player's avatar can influence their experience with the game's world. Whereas my journey through Erdrea in *DQXI* provided an empathetic engagement with a varied scope of humanity and culture across the game's archetypal city spaces, my voyage through *NieR's* vision of a (literally) post-human Earth spurred existential reflections on the game's characters. In both cases, we can see how gameplay emerges as a comingling of player and avatar subjectivities, and the emergence of this liminal subject position has found its written expression in my reflections. Neither fully my own nor my avatars', the experiences I have written about helps demonstrate how a player's creative engagement with videogame narrative and space can lead to the conceptualization of unique personal experiences that operate outside the bounds of self-consciousness. At one point in Calvino's text, Marco Polo tells Kublai Khan: "Arriving at each new city, the traveller finds again a past of his that he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places" (8). In a similar vein, the player can discover in virtual worlds aspects of themselves that never clearly emerge in the routine of their familiar, self-conscious reality.

The player themself is the only being who has agency in the virtual world of a single-player game, perhaps most explicitly represented in their exclusive privilege of walking through and freely carving their own paths among the game's spaces. In *The Practice of*

Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau valorizes the ability of metropolitan walkers to "make use of spaces that cannot be seen" and thus discover solace outside the bounds of the panoptic design of the city which threatens to delimit their subjective experience of it (93). De Certeau understands the subject's engagement with city space as defined by this tension between a city's design – understood from the elevated and detached panoramic scope available atop tall structures – and the walker's manipulation of this design through the act of walking: "'These often miniscule ruses of discipline,' these 'minor but flawless' mechanisms, draw their efficacy from a relationship between procedures and the space that they redistribute in order to make an 'operator' out of it" (96). In a similar manner, the videogame player can learn to defy the often-disciplinary nature of game design to shape a personal relationship with their own gameplay. In this sense, there is an important "distinction between the *forms used* in a system and the *ways of using* this system (i.e., *rules*), that is, between two 'different worlds'" (de Certeau 98). Similarly, with game space, there is an important distinction between compulsively moving between in-game tasks according to what is signalled mandatory by the game's design and taking advantage of improvised and emergent gameplay opportunities that the game's world affords yet does not impose on the player.

Although videogames are rule-based systems that can be understood and interpreted according to the interactive affordances and constraints they impose on players, they also often take place in virtual spaces that allow for a free-form wandering of the player's avatar and imagination. Ian Bogost describes games as "possibility spaces," referring "to the myriad configurations the player might construct to see the ways the processes inscribed in the system work. This is really what we do when we play video games: we explore the

possibility space its rules afford by manipulating the symbolic systems the game provides" ("Rhetoric" 121). In one sense, the deliberate design of these virtual spaces reduces contingency by prescribing the player a set of limited interactions with which they can participate within the space. However, outside of these prescribed interactions that progress the game, the player can spend as much time as they wish exploring and engaging imaginatively with all the spaces and characters afforded to them. While Bogost is correct to point out that "the gestures, experience, and interactions a game's rules allow (and disallow) make up the game's significance," the game's personal significance to the player can usually be found in how they engage with the game *in addition to* these obligatory interactions ("Rhetoric" 121). As Voorhees notes, gameplay adheres to an "economy of desire" in that it "materializes in practices that are iterated, reiterated and, in moments of rupture, remade… [as a] site where the game and player contest each other's capacity to structure and give meaning to their ongoing interfacing" (16). We can thus understand the "possibility" of these spaces not only in terms of their game design affordances, but in the different ways players can imaginatively project themselves into the spaces and imbue them with new meanings.

The research for this project is primarily based on my sense of immersion in *DQXI* and *NieR's* respective worlds and avatars rather than the (often violent) affordances constituting the gameplay loop inherent in their design. The screenshots were taken while simply walking through in-game locales and talking to their resident non-player characters (NPCs), who usually lead conversations that help flesh out the culture and lifestyle of the place or the themes of the narrative. None of this wandering or conversing is compulsory to progress through the game, but it is made available to the player in accordance with the

designers' intention to create the feeling of an interconnected world filled with human depth. These interactions are useless in terms of progressing the game forward but not in their contribution to the player experience. We can see a similar sort of celebration of uselessness stated in Roland Barthes' evaluation of the Eiffel Tower as "an utterly *useless* monument" whose "utilitarian excuses… are nothing in comparison to the great imaginary function which enables men to be strictly human" (239). What makes game spaces potentially ripe for intellectual engagement is their uselessness relative to the goals that lead to the 'completion' of the game. Anyone who plays *DQXI* or *NieR: Automata* can have a similar experience progressing from objective to objective and witnessing the games' respective fixed stories unfold, but subjective, embodied meaning comes from the player's mental and physical engagement with the game between these moments of pure use. Indeed, if we follow Barthes' evaluation that "use never does anything but shelter meaning," then the personalized engagement of creative misuse serves as a means through which the subject becomes empowered to discover new meaning for themselves (240).

Of course, not every game lends itself well to this project's immersive play. Single-player experiences, such as RPGs, that frame player interaction in the context of a world and avatar with narrative and thematic depth will perhaps more likely displace the player's sense of self than those that have abstract environments or goals (e.g. *Tetris*) or multiplayer experiences that are driven by active cooperation or competition with other players (e.g. *Fortnite*). Such games function far better as mere entertainment rather than a self-effacing virtual experience, although Murray's infamous interpretation of her *Tetris* gameplay demonstrates that it is not impossible. In sum, I hope that this project's use of autofictional

and automedial methods demonstrate virtual subjectivity in practice through sustained mental engagement with immersive videogame experiences by (mis)using gameplay capturing technology as a tool for personal reflection rather than social projection. The project applies my desire to actively immerse myself in these games' virtual world, the attempt to resolve immersion's inherent paradox through this desire, and the necessity of both submitting to and exercising my agency as a player within the games' bounds to maintain a sense of virtual subjectivity.

1.9 Conclusion

My aim in this section was not to suggest that immersion is necessary for a pleasant videogame experience, or that all videogames should be designed around the idea of immersing their players. Rather, my intent was to uproot and untangle an overwrought term that continues to prove itself central and unavoidable in discourse about videogames. It does not matter how many theorists try to replace or avoid the term, or how burdened it has become by corporate marketing or the impossibility of its aesthetic ideal; immersion represents a fundamental, paradoxical desire audiences have long projected and continue to project onto the medium. In order to better distinguish the term from the way it has been interchangeably used with 'presence' and 'flow' (especially in HCI and VR research) I centre it through its historical association with narrative. To do this, I returned to and recontextualized Janet Murray's definition of immersion in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, a cultural touchstone in game studies that aimed to express how the formal, material qualities of computer interaction offer a new mode of narrative experience. I discussed how Infocom's

marketing rhetoric for their interactive fiction focused on the remediated fiction-based appeal of their games, and how their demise signified the way that narrative immersion tends to be rhetorically separated from the ludic aspect of games, yet cannot function without the material aspects of digital gameplay. Through a case study of *Undertale*, I unpack the technologically deterministic conception of immersion by showcasing how self-reflexivity and minimalistic graphics can bolster narrative engagement, which in turn helps a player feel immersed in the world without reliance on the type of spectacle often associated with immersion in corporate marketing. Through a case study of *Disco Elysium*, I expand on the interplay of immersion and agency, and argue how interacting and engaging with the game's systems and roleplaying its protagonist can offer the potential for self-reflection. I end off with an autofictional research creation project where I reflect on my gameplay experiences with *Dragon Quest XI* and *NieR: Automata* by channeling my sense of immersion in a way that demonstrates the doubling of the self that virtual subjectivity entails.

Together, these discussions recontextualize immersion as a narrative-based experience that earnestly engages with the multimodal capabilities of videogames without the technical and ludic prerequisites of presence and flow, respectively. Player immersion is a technologically formalized remediation of the fiction-based immersion of a novel reader or film viewer. More than anything, the word represents the desires players, scholars, and developers alike have in the medium's narrative potential. It is something to be actively pursued for narrative pleasure, however unattainable its aesthetic ideal of immediacy—as represented through the imaginary concept of the holodeck—may be. In Section 2, I define

and elaborate on the creative form of play I theorized here in greater detail through the concept of *roleplaying*.

Chapter 2
Roleplaying as Narrative Engagement

2.1 Interstitial Chapter: Segue to Section 2

Section 1 offered a retrospective exploration of the concept of player immersion as a narrative-based phenomenon. Although videogames (and the type of narrative experiences they offer) have grown into something much different than the idealized holodeck form Janet Murray desired, her theory still holds true for what players enjoy about embodying avatars in virtual worlds. As a mediation between the actual world and a virtual one—and of the mundane self and adopted self of an avatar—immersion is a type of embodied, fiction-based play that enables reflection through extended engagement with "as if" scenarios and an adopted identity (Saler). In Section 1 I discussed how videogames like *Undertale* and *Disco Elysium* can facilitate player reflection through their narrative design and the role-playing experience they provide by immersing players in their fictional context and game systems. The next section will elaborate on what the practice of *role-playing* signifies in the context of such videogames.

Section 2 explores how role-playing is one way the player's immersive desire takes shape during gameplay and informs the cultivation of gameplay as a narrative experience. Role-playing encompasses the immersive connection between a player, their avatar, and, by extension, the game world (Gee). Videogames can establish and build the connection between player and avatar in many ways, such as through a thematic incorporation of game mechanics, systems, and audiovisual presentation across their narrative design (Breault). How a player acts according to, outside of, or against the requirements of the game can

involve role-playing so long as they are narratively engaged in their gameplay. Both alignment and tension between a digital game's procedures and its player's desires can be narratively productive and provide an opportunity for self-reflection. Whether defined primarily by the player or the game's story, players must identify with the "alter" they are embodying on some level in order to roleplay them (Bowman).

This can manifest as the player creating a character and making decisions that adhere to their own perceived strengths and values in games such as the *Dungeons and Dragons*-licensed *Baldur's Gate* series (1998-2023), or embodying a well-defined character such as those in the *Final Fantasy* series (1988-present) and feeling points of identification or dissonance as they make their own decisions during gameplay. As RPG scholar Sarah Lynne Bowman notes,

> Immersion into alternate worlds is an alteration of consciousness; the individual begins to view his or her self differently when projecting different or exaggerated personality traits. Even when portraying an identity exceptionally different from the Actual self-concept, the player must find a point of identification with that "alter" and manifest his/her behaviors accordingly. Repeated immersion further solidifies these personas into more tangible mental forms. (Bowman 139)

Any points of alignment or tension between this temporary alter, the player's Actual Self (or perceived self-concept), and their Ideal Self can be exposed through a game's combination of narrative and gameplay elements (Bowman 135). Bowman sums up this phenomenon nicely, noting how "role-playing involves self-reflection in the form of an identity crisis that manifests through an artistic medium" (Bowman 141). If a player is earnestly immersed in

their character role—whether in a solitary, digital context or communal, in-person one—their performance *as* said character through the game's framework may create a dialogue between Actual Self, Ideal Self, and Alter that prompts reflection.

However, as I discussed throughout Section 1, immersion depends on one's desire to feel immersed. Going further, roleplaying depends on whether one has effectively immersed themselves in a given gameplay experience. Immersion is a prerequisite for effective roleplaying and its reflective potential. It is therefore not likely that the specific games I bring up will effectively immerse any kind of player and thereby provide a productive ground for roleplaying, but this is not the point of the argument. The point is to develop a stronger understanding of the ways that single-player digital games facilitate role-playing through narrative design. It is to help promote a literacy and history of roleplaying-based narrative design that is applicable to any player who encounters a game they are able to effectively immerse themself in. Section 2's discussions of role-playing are specific to single-player digital games, which can be distinguished from the performative nature of the term as it relates to tabletop games and live-action roleplay through a focus on "internal play" and negotiations with a procedural system (Stenros and Sihvonen).

While Section 1 focused on describing the aesthetic experience around videogames' virtual worlds through media theory and philosophical questions around reality and the self, Section 2 draws from and contributes more specifically to contemporary game studies research on role-playing and role-playing games (RPGs), Japanese game studies, and videogame achievement systems. The section is comprised of three publications: a book chapter on "Solitary Role-Playing and Self-Reflection: RPG as Creative Playstyle" from the

Epistemic Genres: New Formations of Game Genres collection; an article on "Role-playing Affordances and Aesthetics in Japanese and Western RPGs: Towards a Typology of Videogame Avatars" from volume 7 of the *Replaying Japan Journal*; and another book chapter on "Gaming vs Role-Playing: How Trophies Impact the Aesthetic Experience of Videogames" from the *Trophy Cases* collection. Through these three papers, the section develops ideas of roleplaying as a player-driven creative practice in single-player videogames, how the formal design and storytelling conventions of RPGs from both Western and Japanese traditions facilitate this roleplaying, and how the imposition of achievement systems can interfere (or potentially motivate) the aesthetic experience of roleplaying.

Section 2's content stems from my interest and engagement with single-player videogames related to the RPG tradition based on a literacy of genre and its systemic, aesthetic, and character-driven approaches to storytelling. My research on digital roleplaying throughout this section is similarly based on play and critical analysis of a selection of videogames along with academic research and netnography of player experiences. I apply my understandings of the range of ways RPGs situate their players in relation to the game's avatar and world through their narrative design ("Role-Playing Affordances and Aesthetics"), how this simultaneously embodied and imaginative engagement with one's gameplay can provide grounds for self-reflection ("Solitary Role-Playing and Self-Reflection"), and how this aesthetic experience narrative-driven games offer can be compromised through the gamification of gameplay via extrinsic achievement systems ("Gaming vs Role-Playing").

In the first paper, "Solitary Role-Playing and Self-Reflection: RPG as Creative Playstyle," I argue that the genre of digital role-playing game (RPG) can be reconceptualized

according to the mental engagement of the player rather than adherence to particular game systems or aesthetics. In other words, any single-player digital game with a focus on narrative can become a *role-playing game* insofar as players can imaginatively engage with the game's avatar, world, and mechanics in a manner that supports their experience of role-playing. Role-playing has been theorized by tabletop RPG (TTRPG) and live action role-play (LARP) scholars as a mode of creative social engagement mediated by a game's fiction that allows its players to temporarily inhabit new identities and potentially expand their self-concept through structured play. Adapting this established framework to single-player videogames requires accounting for the different type of conversation that is generated between player and digital game. Role-playing in this context functions as a creative (and potentially subversive) outlet for players to work with and around the affordances of the game to tailor their gameplay experience towards their personal desires. This paper is therefore a crucial starting point to Section 2's interest in defining digital roleplaying's similarities and divergences from prior understandings of the term.

In "Role-playing Affordances and Aesthetics in Japanese and Western RPGs: Towards a Typology of Videogame Avatars", I build on the theory of role-playing developed in the previous paper in the context of digital RPG history. I do this by exploring the historical divergences and cross-cultural influence of Western role-playing game (WRPG) and Japanese role-playing game (JRPG) design traditions to consider how both sub-genres contributed narrative innovations that have defined the digital RPG more broadly. First, the article discusses the recent controversy around the term 'JRPG' to consider its problematic usage by western critics and audiences alongside its value as a categorical tool, while

suggesting the need to use 'WRPG' as a way to combat the othering effect the term has had. It then builds on the concept of digital role-playing I define in the previous paper to consider how the differing relationship between players and their avatars in typical JRPG and WRPG design help ground the theory through the study of specific historical developments. The main section of the article conducts analyses of foundational WRPGs and JRPGs towards creating a character-based typology that highlights the innovative framing of player characters in each genre, while also considering the ways that more modern titles from either genre combine both traditions towards their own unique and creative ends. The paper ends by applying this typology to a range of games outside the pre-conceived mold of JRPGs and WRPGs to demonstrate its use for avoiding the reductive, dichotomous categorizations these genres have become associated with. The intent with this terminology is to offer a genre-neutral alternative to the way scholars and researchers can accurately discuss the different approaches to narrative design and role-playing that any game from any region can adopt for their game's storytelling. Moreover, the terms move away from the nomenclature of RPGs and can be applied to think about the narrative design of other story-driven games and genres. This paper thus builds on the previous paper's generalized theoretical perspective by tracing the evolution of the cross-cultural history of the digital RPG genre and attempts to develop a more concrete understanding of digital roleplaying through the case studies used in its typology.

While the previous two papers developed the concept of roleplaying in the context of player experience and RPG history, respectively, the next chapter supplements this growing understanding by contrasting it with ludic-focused approaches to gameplay and game design.

"Gaming vs Role-Playing: How Trophies Impact the Aesthetic Experience of Videogames" establishes a dichotomy between *roleplaying* and *gaming* as two playstyles and dispositions towards gameplay with opposed approaches in terms of the fulfillment they provide players. I argue that the pursuit of trophies/achievements in a videogame directs player engagement to be more gamified and out-of-character. By offering rewards earned through yet separate from gameplay itself, trophies can change the way players interact with a videogame and perceive their goal with the product. This form of engagement, often called *trophy hunting* (Hill), prioritizes ludic completionism over other modes of involvement videogames offer, such as affective, narrative, social, and spatial (Calleja). While the inclusion of trophies is not inherently problematic—and can serve productive functions such as guiding players to experiment with a game's mechanics—it does embed a corporatized emphasis on Csikszentmihalyi's concept of *flow*, a "challenge-based immersion" of extrinsic mastery, at the core of the play experience (Soderman 148). Trophies present this abstracted form of achievement as a worthy pursuit reflected on player profiles (PSN, Xbox Live, Steam, etc.) that feeds into capitalist notions of merit as measured through the number and difficulty of achievements earned. Featuring close examinations of trophies from videogames like the subversive *Undertale* (Fox) and the hyper-immersive *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games) I analyze what achievements generally ask of players, and how their pursuit directly counters the more aesthetic pleasures of role-playing. By offering a contrasted understanding of gaming and roleplaying, my intent is to shed light on how the extrinsic reward systems that have become pervasive in videogames can both define and obscure the perceived worth

of gameplay—rhetorically favoring a functional rather than aesthetic appreciation of single-player videogames.

Sections 1 and Section 2 together establish a theoretical framework for the interplay of immersion, role-playing, and narrative design. Section 1 unpacked the history of the immersive ideal, including its varied and sometimes contradictory definitions when applied in various media (Bolter and Grusin) and commercial (Sinclair) contexts, to understand it as a longstanding mode of fictional engagement (Saler). Section 2 applies this framework for immersion to build on James Paul Gee's understanding of digital games as conversational partners that players can learn from. For Gee, whose ideas are rooted in conceptions of performance theory from scholars such as Judith Butler, Erving Goffman, and Pierre Bourdieu, role-playing as an avatar/persona is not just an imaginative activity to partake in during gameplay; it is fundamental to how humans behave socially and adapt to new contexts (Bowman; Fine). Seen as part of "a continuum of exchanges between real and virtual spaces" (Coleman), role-playing can become a process of subject formation in which players can critically and creatively engage with their gameplay as a mode of becoming—both by working with and against the bounds of a game's design (Ruberg; Stenros and Sihvonen; Voorhees). The narrative design of games can facilitate this through the development of a narrative system and a thoughtful structure that works to connect player, avatar, and game world more deeply through scripted interactions and/or imparting a sense of agency through interaction options (Berger). Section 2's publications advance an understanding of solitary, digital role-playing with attention to the ways videogames' formal narrative design elements can facilitate the phenomenon, how this can lead players to reflect on the narrative

experience they have with a game, and how the corporately normalized form of videogame consumption epitomized in trophy hunting can detract from its fulfillment.

2.2 Paper 1: Solitary Role-Playing and Self-Reflection: RPG as Creative Playstyle

2.2.1 Introduction

Across game studies and larger games discourse, the term role-playing game (RPG) has come to connote a wide and sometimes disparate range of game objects that offer significantly different gameplay mechanics and experiences. RPGs can be analogue or digital. They can be played communally or alone, although this factor is specific to the type of RPG being played. This chapter is particularly interested in examining the affordances and aesthetics unique to single-player digital RPGs (SPDRPGs), often referred to as CRPGs or DRPGs, as they draw from and differ from their analogue and multiplayer counterparts. Understanding what makes player engagement with this variety of RPG unique can help develop a more nuanced understanding of role-playing as a creative gameplay practice and consider its application to digital games more broadly. What constitutes the imaginary act of role-playing an avatar? What is the connection between role-playing and the player's experience of narrative in single-player digital games?

For digital games, the generic signifier 'RPG' is usually applied to titles with a heavy focus on narrative, character progression, and spatial exploration (Deterding and Zagal 2017, 22-23) while also featuring "the management of attributes, skills, and equipment" (Call, Whitlock, and Voorhees, 2012, 15). Yet, in the modern games industry of the past 10-15 years, these elements can be identified in a slew of titles that might be designated primarily

as action games, open-world games, adventure games, etc., before being called RPGs due to their core mechanics. These narrative-heavy games that blend RPG elements with other genres have been called "hybrid games" (Schules, Peterson, and Picard 2017, 111). Many videogames before the new millennium placed little to no focus on their stories. RPGs from Japanese and western studios were the main exceptions where players could expect to find greater focus on dramatic story arcs and detailed character development. Nowadays, the prevalence of such hybrid games as *God of War* (Santa Monica Studio 2018) from big budget studios, or *Sable* (Shedworks 2021) from small indie teams, speaks to the influence of RPGs across the growth of videogames as a storytelling medium altogether. These two games will serve as case studies further on to work towards a more holistic understanding of RPGs that considers how any single-player digital game with a focus on narrative can become a *role-playing game* insofar as players can imaginatively engage with a game's avatar, world, and mechanics in a manner that supports their experience of role-playing. Role-playing thus functions as a creative (and potentially subversive) outlet for players to work with and around the affordances of the game to tailor their gameplay experience towards their personal desires.

Rethinking what the RPG label encompasses can be a useful exercise for enriching our understanding of the genre's history and the narrative experiences modern videogames have to offer. Moving in this direction, Simkins (2015) defines an RPG as a "game experience… in which the player portrays a character in a setting" rather than as a particular product with fixed properties (56). This focus on the experiential dimension of RPGs over concerns with mechanics can serve as a jumping off point for discussing the typology of the

RPG in the context of digital games. What is interesting about Simkins' definition is that it opens the possibility that *all* videogames where players take on the role of an avatar accomplishing goals in a world can be RPGs. To this perhaps overly general classification, Simkins provides three experiential elements that an RPG should entail: "immersion, experiencing the character; acting, performing in character; and gaming, obeying and manipulating rules and goals in character" (56). Even games that are not traditionally categorized as RPGs can be role-played through active engagement with these three components, all of which are tied to the player's imaginative attachment to playing 'in-character'. This chapter thus examines the RPG not as a strict categorical genre based on the incorporation of specific aesthetics or mechanics, but a way of engaging creatively and imaginatively with one's avatar and the fictional world they inhabit. Seen as part of "a continuum of exchanges between real and virtual spaces," (Coleman 2011, 3) role-playing an avatar can become a process of subject formation by which a player's subjectivity is altered through creatively engaging with their gameplay.

2.2.2 Defining Role-playing in RPGs

Most of the scholarship that explores the activity of role-playing itself pertains to tabletop role-playing games, or TTRPGs (Fine 1983; Bowman 2010), and live-action role-playing games, or LARPs (Pohjola 2003; Montola and Stenros 2004), likely because these genres depend on the outward performance of role-playing with other players for gameplay to take shape. This is, of course, not the case with digital games. Because gameplay and character interactions appear fully represented on the screen, there is no need for a videogame player to

physically enact role-playing (Barton 2008, 23). Furthermore, as procedural systems, narrative-based digital games tend to have specific conditions for progression hard-coded into them. This affords a lesser potential for narrative emergence than the more adaptable, human-led gameplay of analogue RPGs. In TTRPGs, for instance, a dungeon master is aware of the intersubjective desires and dynamics of their players and can shape the direction of their gameplay in a personalized manner. In CRPGs, on the other hand, the dungeon master is a computer program that has fixed narrative routes and interactions for the player to experience (Barton 2008, 23). Role-playing in this context is far less visible. It manifests not as a conversation between people, but a silent interaction between a system with fixed parameters and an individual working through (and sometimes around) that system as they engage physically and imaginatively with its representational properties.

This crucial difference suggests that single-player role-playing deserves to be considered on its own terms, although these terms are often sidelined in games scholarship focused on role-playing's potential for identity alteration and the self-cultivation that can result from this practice (Bowman 2010). To address this gap, Sihvonen and Stenros (2020) focus their attention on single-player digital roleplaying games (SPDRPGs) as particularly safe sites for an individual to explore different aspects of their identity through roleplay due to their isolated nature, while noting that the consequent lack of interpersonal interaction is arguably less validating. Nevertheless, the idea that SPDRPGs can be a less intimidating, machine-facilitated outlet for this type of internal identity play deserves further consideration. In her study of identity experimentation amongst multi-user dungeon (MUD) players in the 1990s, Sherry Turkle (1995) notes how this decentered play with the

multiplicity of one's self is enabled by the anonymity afforded by the digital platform and the ease with which people perceive the representations on the screen as real (12). Accordingly, videogame players are always anonymous through the machinic lens of the game, and the NPCs their worlds represent (regardless of their mimetic detail) can be perceived as real social agents fit for interaction as a springboard for identity play.

By unpacking some of the common assumptions about CRPGs, together with an understanding of role-playing as it has been theorized in relation to TTRPGs and LARPs, I hope to deconstruct this generic label to create a better understanding of the functions of *digital* role-playing games as they relate to and differ from their analogue cousins. One key difference for the videogame player is the embodied enactment of game mechanics through a controller, which makes digital roleplaying necessitate "both dramatistic and mechanistic engagements" (Call, Whitlock, and Voorhees 2012, 18). Mechanics "help establish the sense of 'being' for the character as rooted in the actions of the player. These identity markers are made manifest and negotiated through the ludological elements of play" (17). Whereas communal roleplaying allows players to enact their personas verbally and interpersonally within the fictional confines of the game being played and the group participating in it, solitary digital role-playing demands that players work from the fixed, authored representations of the virtual world and its affordances and limitations for action.

While TTRPGs and CRPGs offer quite different experiences mechanically and materially, much of the attention given to the former about role-playing's potential effects on players' self-conception can be extended to narrative-driven digital games at large. Role-playing in any of these contexts can be meaningful upon reflection by holding a mirror to the

player, albeit one mediated by fiction and rules: "Role-players can practice personality aspects, many of which may be archetypal in nature, and can then objectively view the distinction between their own Actual identity and the performed identity. This enactment process allows the individual to decide to either adopt such traits or to avoid them, depending on his or her response to the events and emotions in-game" (Bowman 2010, 144-145). The personal value of role-playing thus begins with the subjective meaning derived from immersing oneself in a character during gameplay. At a base level, videogames offer worlds made up of visual, procedural, and other semiotic signs that come to have meaning as a player experiences them. Thus, since "there is nothing in a game that is inherently meaningful; any meaning that is present must therefore be imbued by the player" (Zook 2012, 220). At the same time, to play a videogame by (necessarily) adhering to its rule system is to subject oneself to the truth claims its affordances and feedback put forth (Voorhees 2013, 262). Any meaning one derives from digital role-playing is therefore always individually cultivated and interpreted in response to the situations imposed on the player. Gameplay comes about as a clash of agents (player and game) imposing themselves on one another in an interactive exchange, as does its meaning.

Perhaps the most interesting advantage CRPGs afford for role-playing is the digital avatar and the way it can be presented and developed as a character on-screen. Bowman (2010) notes this as well: "The presentation of an avatar allows for enhanced immersion. The reference point for the characters is no longer the physical manifestation of the players themselves but the iconic representation of the avatar" (32). There is thus an ontological distinction drawn between character and avatar in the context of games: "*character* refers to

the portrayal of a consistent persona in a fictional world of a role-playing game"; while *avatar* refers to "the virtual representations of the player" (Bowman and Shrier 2017, 396). Character has inherent narrative connotations while an avatar denotes the virtually material entity that may or may not be realized as a fictional character. Players control avatars in non-narratively driven online sandbox games like *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003), but these are often played as extensions or alter egos of the mundane self rather than characters with their own narrative agency (Coleman 2011, 84). Not all digital avatars are fully defined characters, but playable characters are almost always represented as avatars.

A fleshed out, humanized videogame character like *God of War's* (2018) Kratos is an avatar in the sense that he functions as a "surrogate body" and "toolkit" for the player to inhabit and interact with the game's virtual world, but he also has a distinct "identity" with substantial character agency in that the player is made to enact his will through gameplay rather than making narrative decisions in his place (Gee 2015, 17). Thus, whereas TTRPGs and LARPs afford players a great deal of agency that allows them to shape their characters' actions in an improvisational and emergent manner, CRPG players must incorporate their avatar's autonomous agency into the role-playing experience. As opposed to player agency, which is usually defined as the player's ability to take meaningful action of their own accord, character agency works as a narratively contextualized reason for a digital game's resistance to the player doing whatever they want (Stang 2019). Character agency is thus structured by the game's narrative possibilities and the interaction limitations imposed on gameplay in the context of said narrative. In other words, digital role-playing requires an internalization of character agency for the player to effectively immerse themself in their avatar. Many

videogame avatars are constituted by the same fixed identities and character arcs we see in novels and movies, yet they are embodied by a player who willingly internalizes and executes their will in the interest of cultivating immersion. This approach to avatar characterization, which was popularized in JRPGs such as *Final Fantasy IV* (Square 1991) and *Phantasy Star IV* (Sega 1995) throughout the 1990s, is more common across modern videogames. While traditional western CRPGs tend to use blank slate character creation systems borrowed from the history of TTRPGs, immersing oneself in an established character and learning to engage with a virtual world through their identity and gameplay actions is where videogames offer a unique form of role-playing. This imaginative engagement is facilitated by the representation of the player's character on-screen during hours of continuous play, and the time spent embodying said character enables a bonding between the two that generates a mixed subjectivity that grows and becomes itself during the course of play.

In the interest of cultivating a more nuanced understanding of digital RPGs with a focus on their social function, I will use Sihvonen and Stenros' (2020) acronym SPDRPG from here on rather than CRPG. This label better demarcates a focus on "single-player activities" and encompasses RPGs and hybrid games across gaming devices other than the PC. SPDRPG works as a more holistic signifier that applies to a wide variety of narrative-driven digital games where the player takes on the role of an internally situated avatar.

2.2.3 Single-Player Digital Role-Playing

Role-playing in SPDRPGs can function as a creative and potentially subversive practice by which players use the mechanical and narrative interactions offered by the game to engage in self-reflective identity play. Despite the prominence of SPDRPGs as texts analyzed in game studies, there is a surprising lack of scholarship that closely examines solitary play's creative and subversive potential. Sihvonen and Stenros (2020) make a notable effort in this direction. In particular, the authors are interested in *internal play*: the "queering" practice of imaginative projection and narrativization of what is not explicitly represented on-screen, yet nevertheless comprises the player's engagement with the product. Because players cannot physically embody their avatars in digital play, role-playing is mostly relegated to the activity of one's imagination. In this sense, "a game character can be thought of as a procedural object that is being used as an experimental and performative tool by the player… it acts as a vehicle for the player's internal processes of playing pretend with and testing out the pleasures of role-play." Role-playing is a way the player exercises agency to fuel what Janet Murray (2017) calls the active creation of belief:

> When we enter a fictional world, we do not merely 'suspend' a critical faculty; we also exercise a creative faculty. We do not suspend disbelief so much as we actively *create belief.* Because of our desire to experience immersion, we focus our attention on the enveloping world and we use our intelligence to reinforce rather than to question the reality of the experience. (136)

Through role-playing, players build on the narrative details embedded in the game, making story itself a synthesis of the developer's and player's creative contributions to the gameplay experience.

However, the unique role-playing affordances of SPDRPGs does not end at the avatar. Some scholars have noted that too much attention has been given to the avatar as the primary source for role-playing, whereas game mechanics and non-player characters (NPCs) can provide equally valuable material. Taylor, Kampe, and Bell (2015) argue that "player/avatar affiliation is a fluid association [and dynamic performance], not a fixed state." Therefore, what we might understand as a stable, sustained identification with an avatar is actually a shifting influence of player subjectivity, procedure, and representation, with "input devices, avatar appearance and abilities, in-game opponents and barriers, [and] players' embodied cognitive competencies" all factoring into the oscillating nature of role-play. Burgess and Jones (2020), on the other hand, focus their discussion on how players' connection to the game world and their avatar is deepened through bonding with NPCs. The interest in these characters results in "a 'bleed effect' similar to that of non-computerised role play, and players shared emotions with their PC [player character] similar to that of identification." Thus, the effectiveness of role-playing in SPDRPGs largely depends on how well the game characterizes its NPCs, meaning these supporting characters can be equally important to facilitating a player's immersion as strong avatar characterization or customization options. This supports Taylor, Kampe, and Bell's observation that one becomes immersed not only through one's avatar, but through the entirety of the game world as a set of represented and simulated elements.

Aside from the immaterial practice of internal play, a solitary player can use the affordances of the game in creative ways to facilitate on-screen role-playing. While a non-immersed player may simply use the game mechanics as intended to accomplish whatever goal the game has assigned to them, a role-player seeking to cultivate their sense of immersion may seek creative ways to manipulate the mechanics. Burgess and Jones (2020) note the ways that players of *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare 2010) tried such techniques to fuel the emotional connections they developed with the game's companion characters: "some NPCs in the *Mass Effect* series could prompt an emotional attachment strong enough that players reflected on how they could use the game mechanics to further these emotional attachments for no tangible benefit." One player, for instance, notes how they "spent several minutes making Shepard [their avatar] walk around the dance floor in Flux until Garrus [a companion] was standing close enough to look like they were dancing." Whether purely imaginative or facilitated by the game's affordances, role-playing works to create belief and fuel one's sense of immersion in the fictional world.

Solitary role-playing can be seen as a queering of the normative, goal-oriented play that SPDRPGs are most associated with. Bo Ruberg (2019) conceptualizes queer play as "the powerful act of playing the 'wrong' way," which "resists and repurposes games for alternative desires" (18). Outside of games developed particularly by and for queer players, queer play thus works as a way of reclaiming commercial videogames through resistant approaches and attitudes that work against the normative consumption of games. One alternative form of play Ruberg covers is the slow play encouraged by games in the walking simulator genre, such as *Gone Home* (Fullbright 2013), but they note how it can be applied

even to mainstream action games such as *Halo* (Bungie 2001) through "meander[ing] and observ[ing]" rather than simply moving from one imposed objective to another. Queer play thus challenges the hegemonic consumption of games, defying the widespread convention that players use their time in the game simply to accomplish the goals it offers and achieve mastery over it. As a subject engaged in queer play, the role-player can redefine their ontological relationship with a game and the medium itself. When role-playing, game space and mechanics are no longer simply something to conquer and master, but something to savour both aesthetically and imaginatively. This underscores the essential difference between role-playing and simply playing a game: "The gamer plays the game as [them]self, while the player who wishes to lose [them]self to the fantasy is the true role-player—[they play] the character" (Fine 1983, 207). Yet, SPDRPGs are not only social experiences insofar as they feature deep and nuanced relationships with NPCs. The relationship between a solitary player and the game they are playing operates as a co-determined social dynamic.

Role-playing can change the way the player sees themself in relation to their gameplay, shifting the meaning of the game as a result. With its relatively linear narrative, *God of War* (Santa Monica Studio 2018) is cinematic in its style and structure. At the same time, it offers optional sections of free exploration of its world by boat and by foot, during which the player can search for crafting material for the game's CRPG-inspired equipment system and spend more time trading stories with Kratos' son, Atreus. Role-playing as Kratos asks the player to mentally adopt his conflicted role as a parent, weighing protective impulses against a desire for Atreus to mature as quickly as possible and become self-sufficient. There are moments in battle when Atreus will be held by an enemy, prompting a simultaneously

practical and narratively coherent response from the player to rush to his rescue. Freeing Atreus in such a moment rewards the player with the advantage of having his assistance again and rewards the role-player through enacting a parental impulse. Despite the game's overt and mostly linear approach to storytelling, Kratos' reserved nature and depicted hesitancy to dote over Atreus leaves the depth of his feeling open to be completed through the player's subjective engagement. The time spent simultaneously embodying and witnessing Kratos bond with Atreus, despite the lack of player agency in these interactions, invests the player in the relationship through Kratos' perspective (Figure 10). Again, the primary affordance for role-playing Kratos comes through their perceived relationship with Atreus, an NPC. This core narrative and mechanical hook provides emotional weight to both the game's combat and exploration segments, which opens a space for the player to engage in their own reflection on parenthood—and, through the flawed depiction of Kratos, toxic masculinity. Whether the player understands or disproves of Kratos' parenting choices, these feelings are all core to the becoming of the subject at play. While *God of War* does not afford the player much narrative agency outside of the optional tasks they choose to take on upon Atreus' request, it demonstrates how videogame role-playing can be driven by a strong portrayal of embodied character agency.

Figure 10. God of War (2018)



The player, as Kratos, guides Atreus how to hunt with his bow (Santa Monica Studio 2018).

2.2.4 The Social Function of Solitary Role-Playing

Although SPDRPGs lack the adaptable interpersonal social dynamic of TTRPGs and LARPs, this does not mean their gameplay and character interactions do not offer an interactive social element. After all, the solitary role-player adopts a role that is fundamentally social based on how their character is situated in the fiction of the world and in relation to NPCs. A character exists in a web of social relations that, when merged with the attitudes and aspirations of its player, becomes a unique and socially expressive subject. Sihvonen and Stenros (2020) define solitary role-playing as "an activity that both shows the player their own image (through direct avatar action) and makes them into something unknown, strange, and norm-questioning (or "queer") to themself (through performing a role)." *Queering* here refers

broadly to the performative elements of gameplay and the uniquely personal meanings internal play can project beyond what is being represented on screen. Notably, this performance has no audience other than the player themself, who therefore "functions as both actor and spectator at the same time" (Sihvonen and Stenros). In acting outside oneself yet for oneself, the solitary role-player can perceive themself as a separate, externalized subject through their gameplay.

In this sense, the role-player is indirectly interacting with themself through the direct mediation of their in-game interactions. Gee (2015) takes up this idea by conceiving of the interactive turn-taking inherent to gameplay as a dynamic conversation between a player, as they are embodied in the identity of an avatar, and a game as an internally coherent world that reflects its own discursive and rhetorical meanings. This conception of gameplay as conversation allows Gee to holistically embrace videogames as a form of discursive engagement in the same vein as oral conversations and interaction with the real world. For Gee, people (like games) are worlds that we act upon through conversation: "In a conversation in language, we have goals we want to accomplish (e.g., bonding, informing, motivating, manipulating, or reassuring our listener or listeners). We probe our listener/s through moves in language (a form of action), reflect on their responses, and then act again based on these responses. We probe each other, though, in the guise of specific identities or enacting specific real world avatars" (21). Adopting and interacting through a role is thus not specific to RPGs; it is fundamental to how humans approach and adapt their interactions in specific social contexts (Goffman 1959, 15-16).

The 2018 iteration of *God of War* deconstructs the toxic, vengeful masculinity of its series' history by problematizing Kratos as a flawed character projecting his own trauma with the way he controls Atreus. In an IGN opinion piece, John Borba (2018) reflects on how Kratos' hypocrisy and short temper towards Atreus "really hit home for me as I come from a long line of men with short tempers" and discusses the need he feels to control that aspect of himself so as not to pass that trait down to his daughter. Although Kratos as a character is an epitome of patriarchy, players like Borba can play him queerly by channeling the role-playing experience the game affords back towards self-understanding. Ruberg (2019) and Stang (2022) refer to this subversive practice as a "too-close" reading: a "fight to make our own meaning from games… on the terms and through the methods that we deem meaningful rather than those set and policed by the gamer status quo" (Ruberg 2019, 61). The ideology of this gamer status quo can be seen in the comments responding to Borba's piece, such as DARKTOOTHX's response: "Cringey shit ign." This knee-jerk negativity highlights Ruberg's point. Even in a game featuring a violent, patriarchal, straight male protagonist, many gamers continue to "dictate the boundaries around how 'acceptable' meaning is supposed to be made from video games," which tends to be limited to an anti-intellectual, "just for fun" discourse (Ruberg 2017, 58). On the other hand, user Enuo takes up Borba's invitation to self-reflect on their own gameplay experience, noting how they "related a lot to Atreus playing this game" in the moments "he muttered something under his breath just loud enough for Kratos to hear" as they used to do the same thing "just to see if I could get a reaction from my dad." Interpretation of personal gameplay experiences enabled by roleplay can work as a mode of critical resistance (Ruberg 2019; Soderman 2022).

A player thus brings with them into a gameplay experience their individual motivations and desires, which shift according to and develop out of the representational and mechanical affordances the game reflects back to them. In this sense, digital gameplay is an "agonistic struggle—playful but consequential—out of which meaningful human action emerges" (Voorhees 2013, 16). Through the course of action the player takes, and how it resonates as a unified experience made up of all the game's elements, a conversation is generated from which reflection becomes possible. It is this principle of reciprocal interaction that allows Gee (2015) to conceive of a "unified discourse analysis" that connects language with gameplay (a fluid representation of actions) and identity with avatars (a fluid representation of selfhood) (39). Gee's framework shows how the syntax and semantics of gameplay are not far detached from those of real, everyday discourse—and can be used as a reference point to explain how personal identity and the actions associated with it have always been a sort of game. When we enter a given social situation with a particular role (e.g. student, romantic partner, athlete) we must adapt ourselves and behave within the existing structure and affordances that role entails. As with beginning a new videogame, the transition between roles is like entering a new world where the self undergoes a necessary shift: "Immersion into alternate worlds is an alteration of consciousness; the individual begins to view his or her self differently when projecting different or exaggerated personality traits. Even when portraying an identity exceptionally different from the Actual self-concept, the player must find a point of identification with that "alter" and manifest his/her behaviors accordingly" (Bowman 2010, 139). Accordingly, embodying a flawed, patriarchal alter in Kratos can lead players to reckon with how they have been influenced by similar behaviors

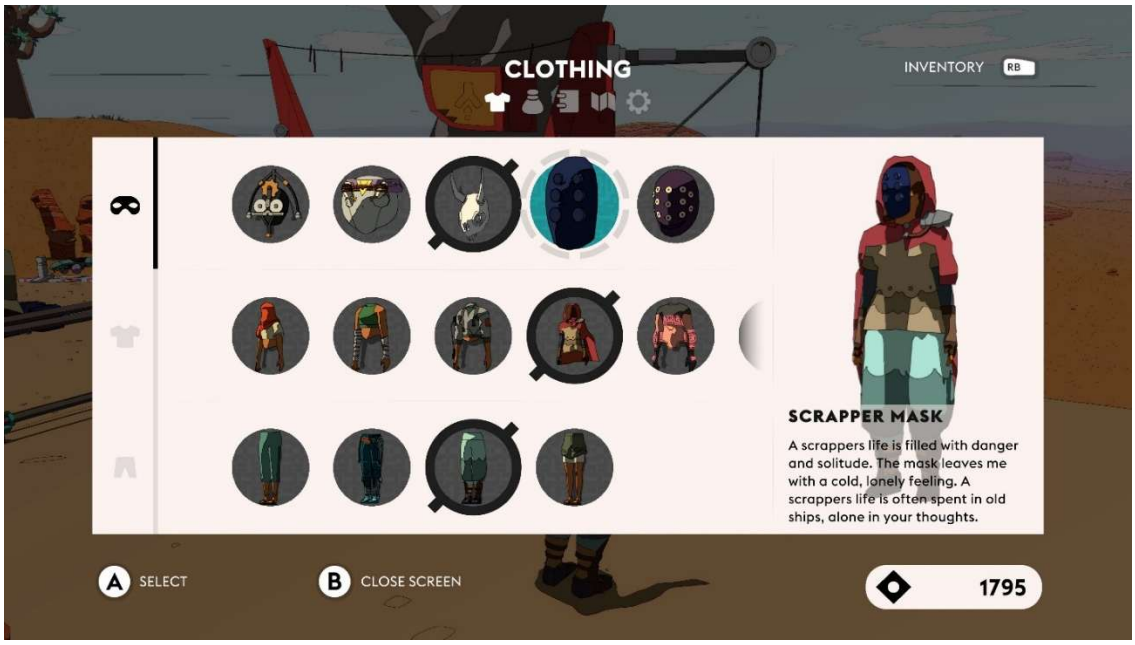
(from themselves or others) in their actual life. In this sense, the self engaged in roleplay is co-created by the circumstances of the fictional *and* mechanical frame as well as the individual's performance within its bounds.

However, conversing with an RPG in the form of a digital media object is not the same as conversing with other individuals. As a rhetorically expressive system we adapt to, a digital game exerts a relation of power over its player. Ian Bogost argues that "[procedures] are tied to authority, crafted from the top down, and put in place to structure behavior and identify infringement. Procedures are sometimes related to ideology; they can cloud our ability to see other ways of thinking" (3). On one hand, this power dynamic between player and game system might seem alarming and stifling of individual expression. However, in the context of the subversive practice of role-playing, this limitation becomes a constructive anchor for the generation of narrative meaning. Looking at videogames through the lens of procedural rhetoric alone reduces the game to a pre-determined experience with a fixed rhetorical meaning. Only by accounting for the role of narrative play can we appreciate the personal and malleable nature of what a player can take away from such structured engagement: "without this creative play the game cannot function as a metaphoric mirror. If the player does not reach outside of the system, the reflection is not of the player, only that of the system" (Stenros and Sihvonen 2020). Like navigating any social discursive structure, digital gameplay takes shape through a balance of *objective probabilities* from which *subjective aspirations* develop (Bourdieu 1977, 77).

This premise is reflected in the narrative design of *Sable* (Shedworks 2021), an indie game set in a large, freely explorable world populated with CRPG-like settlements and NPC

interactions. The game puts players in the role of the titular Sable, an adolescent girl undergoing her Gliding: a coming-of-age journey partaken by individuals from cultures around the world. During her Gliding, Sable is tasked simply with going into the larger world away from her tribe, meeting new people, undergoing tasks that appeal to her from experts at specific jobs, and eventually deciding what she wishes to do with the rest of her life. As the player completes tasks relating to each individual job, they will earn the mask associated with it. These masks can be equipped by Sable and the player can switch between them freely without commitment. As in classic CRPGs, *Sable*'s sense of progression is tied to the acquisition of new equipment. However, unlike in those games, there is no practical gameplay benefit to *Sable's* gear. Equipment in the game is thus removed from the usual neo-liberal risk/reward assessments that RPGs ask their players to undertake and is instead freed to serve an entirely narrative-driven function for the role-player (Baerg 2012, 171). *Sable* thus invites role-playing through its mechanics, while a game like *God of War* is more entrenched in traditional RPG stat optimization and requires the role-player to often work in spite of its functionally intended design. Putting on a specific mask invites the player to an internal play of its respective lifestyle (e.g. machinist, guard, scrapper) to determine if it feels right for your personal version of Sable (Figure 11). Each NPC associated with a given job generally has their own personality quirks and gives the player an opportunity to compare themself against and understand how that job can be role-played. *Sable's* NPC interactions use conversation trees similar to traditional CRPGs, although these are mainly opportunities for player expression and character development rather than choices that lead to different story outcomes.

Figure 11. Equipment in Sable.



The Scrapper Mask item description evokes the feeling of the Scrapper lifestyle rather than any functional benefit to gameplay (Shedworks 2021).

The only story-altering choice comes at the end of the game. Once the player has finished exploring the world for Sable's Gliding, they must return to her village. There, the player will be able to choose among all the masks they have earned to decide Sable's life path and complete her journey into adulthood. This decision encourages a final act of role-playing that asks the player to reflect on all the activities they have performed as Sable around the game world and choose what feels right for the character—a character who has become an extension of themself and who carries all the feelings experienced while embodying her. This ultimate choice encourages the player to reflect on how they roleplayed Sable, which could even be an extension of their own desires in life. In a Reddit thread where players were discussing their final choice of mask, many users explained their rationale by

reflecting on what aspects of the gameplay experience appealed most to them. User xplauriano felt that the Ibexii Mask "seemed like the only way to go" because it felt like "their true friends" were with the tribe, whereas the other masks involved a life of exploration which they did not think was "as beautiful as a place to call home." Another user, ArtieStroke, picked the Machinist Mask because their "connection to Simoon," Sable's hoverbike, "was one of the most important parts of this game to me."

When role-playing, then, the player must not only consider what the game compels them to do at face value, but how the game aligns them with a fictional avatar who has their own diegetic goals in the game's universe. Gee (2015) describes the melding of self and avatar as a *projective identity* through which "players are both imposed upon by the character [they] play (i.e., we must take on the character's goals) and impose [themselves] on that character (i.e., we make the character take on our goals)" (97). The game's fiction, or its *universe of discourse*, situates the player in a liminal position between themself and their avatar which contextualizes the types of actions they carry out through the game (Gee 45). Gee uses the term *situated meanings* to describe the contextually sensitive meanings and inferences that "are determined by what speakers/writers and listeners/readers take as relevant aspects of context… [and] by shared cultural knowledge" (49). Only if the player embraces the projective identity that a game's universe of discourse draws them into can they grasp the situated meanings that gameplay instills in them. Bourdieu (1977) explains this tension between social determinism and individual agency through the concept of habitus, which he conceptualizes as "principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without in any way being

the product of obedience to rules… and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor" (72). Similar to what Ruberg (2019) notes in their discussion of queer play, then, the player is not always a mere thrall to the game's design and the design itself does not necessarily predetermine the player's unique experience with the game. Digital gaming becomes meaningful and self-revealing through the player's creative expression in the marginal space between structure and freedom.

2.2.5 Conclusion

Role-playing in single-player digital games requires the player to look beyond the game system and what it asks from them to progress and complete the game. Role-playing has been theorized by TTRPG and LARP scholars as a mode of creative social engagement mediated by a game's fiction that allows its players to temporarily inhabit new identities and potentially expand their self-concept through structured play. Adapting this established framework to single-player videogames requires accounting for the different type of conversation that is generated between player and digital game—one that develops a unique subjectivity co-determined by the game's universe of discourse as painted by its gameplay affordances, avatar representation, and character dynamics together with the personal background and subjective desires of its player. To highlight this creative practice as it emerges in play, the RPG genre in respect to videogames can be reconceptualized according to the mental engagement of the player rather than adherence to particular game mechanics, systems, or aesthetics. In other words, I propose regarding the SPDRPG as a particular *experience* with a videogame's fictional world in which the player makes an imaginative

effort to roleplay as their avatar. This chapter is meant to serve as a theoretical framework for applying this idea to a broader range of digital games than would fall strictly under the CRPG label to consider the unique ways that videogames structure affordances for role-playing, and how players operate within and around this procedural structure to cultivate meaning from their imaginative engagement.

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2.3 Paper 2: Role-Playing Affordances and Aesthetics in Japanese and Western RPGs: Towards a Typology of Videogame Avatars

2.3.1 Introduction

This article explores the mechanical and narrative achievements of Japanese role-playing games (often referred to as JRPGs) to examine how they can broaden Western understandings of role-playing and avatar characterization in videogames. Western academic definitions of digital role-playing games, and the practice of game-based role-playing, are often derived from Western RPGs' (or WRPG) design conventions—such as character

creation and multilinear story choices derived from *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974). The gaming website Extra Credits addresses that "the core element that distinguishes JRPGs from WPRGs is that of narrative engagement—what role the player occupies within the gaming world. JRPGs tell a story, while WRPGs place players in a story" (Schules, Peterson, and Picard 114). Similarly, Bjarnason (2020) defines JRPGs by the conventionally more linear and character-driven approach to narrative design typical to them.

While the defining features of the JRPG are debatable and will be discussed more thoroughly later in this article, the first key takeaway is that the genre's approach to game design and storytelling contains distinct qualities that have come to expand the scope of digital RPGs more broadly. Foundational JRPGs, particularly throughout the 1990s, developed a type of role-playing unique to videogames that has players embody a character who makes their own decisions, rather than one whose identity and will is defined by the player. My intention is to celebrate this history as one that helped define the digital RPG as a whole. In addition, the article will suggest new, regionally neutral terminology to pull away from the reductive "othering" effects that defining Japanese-developed and Western-developed RPGs against each other has had (Pelletier-Gagnon and Hutchinson 6).

The research thus builds on Joleen Blom's questioning of "the discourse that limits the JRPG to linear narratives as a form of othering Japanese RPGs that confines the genre to a static identity, which distorts our understanding of its narrative structures from the outset, and only perpetuates the archaic Orientalist dichotomy" (79). Foundational JRPG series like *Dragon Quest* (1986-present) and *Final Fantasy* (1987-present) helped popularize design conventions like linear narrative structures and character-driven storytelling. However, the

fixation on these elements—and the way they have been used to define the entire genre in opposition to contemporary Western releases like *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* (Origin Systems 1985) and *Wasteland* (Interplay Productions 1988)—"comes with assumptions and structural biases that can potentially pose prejudice to efforts for a more diverse understanding of videogames from a transnational perspective" (Pelletier-Gagnon and Hutchinson 4). In other words, conventions that have stemmed from and helped define the JRPG have merit towards understanding the influence of series and individual games central to the genre's history. At the same time, these design trends should not be extrapolated too broadly at the risk of obfuscating titles that push those conventions' boundaries or the intertwined cross-cultural influence of JRPGs. With this core concern in mind, this article seeks to synthesize the discourse and narrative design innovations of WRPGs and JRPGs by drawing on theories of role-playing and establishing a typology of avatars (or player characters) based on case studies from foundational WRPGs, JRPGs, and titles that blur the boundaries of pre-conceived notions regarding both sub-genres.

In the section "Why Use JRPG and WRPG?" the article will discuss the recent controversy around the term 'JRPG' to consider its problematic usage alongside its value as a categorical tool, while suggesting the need to use 'WRPG' to combat the othering effect the term has had. In "What is (Single-Player Digital) Role-Playing?" I will then unpack the theoretical and historical background of the concept of 'role-playing,' noting its basis in tabletop RPGs (TTRPGs) and live-action roleplaying games (LARPs), to consider how the differing relationships between players and their avatars in typical JRPG and WRPG design can be applied towards developing an understanding of role-playing as it relates specifically

to videogames. The main section of the article, "Towards a Typology of Videogame Avatars," will conduct analyses of foundational WRPGs and JRPGs towards creating a character-based typology that highlights the innovative framing of player characters in each genre, while also considering the ways that more modern titles from either genre combine both traditions towards their own unique and creative ends. The article concludes by applying this typology to a range of games outside the pre-conceived mould of JRPGs and WRPGs to demonstrate its use for avoiding the reductive, dichotomous categorizations these genres have become associated with.

2.3.2 Why Use JRPG and WRPG?

2023 brought forth widespread discussions surrounding the controversial background of the term JRPG as derogatory in its original use. This discourse proliferated when *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn* (Square Enix 2013) director Naoki Yoshida noted in an interview that JRPG was "a term created by western media rather than users and media in Japan," and that many Japanese developers would want their games to be considered generally as RPGs rather than a separate sub-genre (quoted in Nightingale 2023). At the same time, other Japanese developers, like *Final Fantasy VII* (Square 1997) director Yoshinori Kitase, see the value of the signifier JRPG "in terms of differentiating—maybe showing off a slightly different approach to games or a unique flavour in terms of Japanese-made games" (quoted in Regan 2023). Both perspectives reveal a tension between non-Japanese folks using the term to either specify the typical qualities of RPGs that have come out of Japan or demean those titles by

separating them from the 'real' RPGs that Western developers make in a way that dismisses Japanese developers' own approach to creating RPGs.

While we should not dismiss the ways that Western media proliferated a negative use of the term JRPG, particularly throughout the 2000s, it can also serve as what Pelletier-Gagnon and Hutchinson (2022) have termed a "discursive field" that helps connect the narrative aesthetics unique to Japanese-developed RPGs to the larger lineage of digital RPGs (5). This can also help avoid privileging Western approaches to the genre common in role-playing discourse. At the same time, the term's history is rooted in bias and distortion from Western game reviews. Despite the prevalence and positive critical reception of JRPGs in the West throughout the 1990s, the term was not commonly used until 2004, at which point it began to appear in writing that was often critical of a perceived stagnation in Japanese-developed RPG design (Koyama 21). Japanese videogame scholarship must unpack these existing misconceptions to more attentively and accurately define JRPG as a discursive field. For example, Koyama unpacks the common assumption that *Dragon Quest* is the first JRPG by analyzing its adherence to WRPG design (20), while Blom questions the notion that JRPGs and WRPGs can be distinguished by linear and non-linear story structures, respectively (82). Texts such as these help repair JRPG as a discursive field by simultaneously addressing the problematic pre-conceptions Yoshida takes issue with and developing the productive categorizing function Kitase sees value in.

This article aims to contribute to this effort by understanding the narrative design innovations of JRPGs as helping define the genre while also connecting them to the related history of WRPGs. Despite their unique influences, aesthetics, and histories, the cross-

pollination between design and storytelling in WRPGs, JRPGs, and other narrative-driven videogames over the last 3-4 decades calls for new terminology that can convey these narrative strategies without relying on their generic, regional origins. While these established genre labels can still be categorically useful, it is equally important to consider what brings them together under the single label *RPG*: that is, as defined holistically by Simkins (2018), providing players an *immersive* experience that balances *acting* and fictional engagement with *gaming* (58). While not as standardized and prevalent a term as JRPG, the 'W' in WRPG is important to use as othering occurs when games that adhere to the western-originated design model are referred to simply as RPGs—a stand-in for universality that the more uniquely Japanese model is excluded from.

2.3.3 What is (Single-Player Digital) Role-Playing?

Role-playing is a term that unifies WRPGs and JRPGs in their very names, and thus can serve as an entry point for considering the ways their histories and innovations diverge and converge. This article will examine the affordances and aesthetics unique to these forms of single-player digital RPGs as they draw from and differ from their analogue and multiplayer counterparts (Stenros and Sihvonen 2020). Understanding what makes player engagement and avatar interaction across digital RPGs unique can help develop a more nuanced understanding of role-playing as a creative gameplay practice and consider its application to digital games more broadly. How does the concept of role-playing apply to digital games? And how have Western and Japanese-developed RPGs both helped define what digital role-playing uniquely encompasses?

Most of the scholarship that explores the activity of role-playing itself pertains to tabletop role-playing games, or TTRPGs (Fine 1983; Bowman 2010), and live-action role-playing games, or LARPs (Pohjola 2003; Montola and Stenros 2004). As opposed to videogames, these analogue genres "depend on the outward performance of role-playing with other players for gameplay to take shape" (Franiczek, forthcoming). Because gameplay and character interactions appear fully represented on the screen, videogame players do not embody and act out their role in the same way that players of analogue RPGs are required to (Barton 2008, 23). Furthermore, as procedural systems, story-heavy digital games tend to have specific conditions for progression that restrict player agency to the bounds of what the developers have chosen to represent. Digital RPGs tend to allow for narrative variance in only minor ways due to structural restrictions from overarching content that the player must experience to progress. This affords a lesser potential for narrative emergence than the more adaptable, human-led gameplay of analogue RPGs. The emergent narratives encouraged by these games "are not prestructured or preprogrammed," but rather take shape during gameplay (Jenkins 2004). A dungeon master in a TTRPG is aware of the desires and dynamics of their players and can shape the direction of their gameplay in a personalized manner. In digital RPGs, the dungeon master is a computer program that has fixed narrative routes and interactions for the player to experience (Barton 2008, 23). In narratological terms, the *fabula*—or raw story content—of an analogue RPG can be almost entirely malleable, whereas a digital RPG's fabula is multi-linear: it can only deviate within pre-written, designed possibilities. On the other hand, the *sjuzhet*—or experienced narrative—of both analogue and digital RPGs emerges during gameplay as a player's realization of the

game's fabula (Tomashevsky 1965, 68). Both types of narrative are emergent in the sense that they are structured by gameplay processes, but the story content of a digital RPG is more heavily bound to its game design. Thus, roleplaying in a digital RPG is an imaginative engagement between a player and a fixed digital representation rather than a co-created performance between individuals engaged in a shared imaginative construction: "it manifests not as a conversation between people, but a silent interaction between a system with fixed parameters and an individual working through (and sometimes around) that system as they engage physically and imaginatively with its representational properties" (Franiczek, forthcoming).

Thus, whereas tabletop RPGs and LARPs afford players a great deal of agency that allows them to shape their characters' actions in an improvisational and emergent manner, digital RPG players must incorporate their avatar's autonomous agency into the role-playing experience. As opposed to *player agency*, which theorists often define as the player's ability to take meaningful action of their own accord, *character agency* works as a narratively contextualized reason for a digital game's resistance to the player desiring choices outside of the bounds of the game's design (Stang 2019). Character agency is thus structured by the game's linear or multi-linear story possibilities and the interaction limitations imposed on gameplay in the context of said story. In other words, digital role-playing requires an internalization of character agency for the player to effectively immerse themself in their avatar. Yet, the procedurally limited and less malleable nature of character agency does not necessarily equate to lesser player engagement, but rather calls for a reframing of the type of engagement that digital RPGs offer (Bowman 30). Hutchinson explores the quality of this

engagement in her study of the interpersonal relations represented between a player character and their companions, where "[r]oleplay means inhabiting the body or consciousness of another, perhaps experiencing the world in a different way. Playing a role also means acting out the jobs, skills, functions and appointments of a fictional character" (186). This definition focuses on perspective, experience, and function/mechanics, enabling a productive consideration of how the *limitations* on player agency and the emphasis on externally defined avatar characteristics in digital games offers its own spin on role-playing.

While traditional Western RPGs tend to use blank slate character-creation systems borrowed from the history of tabletop games, JRPGs beginning with *Dragon Quest IV*—or *Doragon Kuesuto Fō: Michibikareshi Monotachi* (Chunsoft 1990) as it was originally called in Japan— tended to eschew character creation in favor of established protagonists depicted with their own distinct looks and personalities separate from the player. The pleasure of role-playing in this context, which is unique to videogames, is on immersing oneself in an established character and learning to engage with a virtual world through their identity and gameplay actions. Because TTRPGs were never as popular in Japan as they were in the west throughout the late twentieth century, many Japanese developers and players "became aware of RPGs through CRPGs," such as *Ultima* (Origin Systems 1981) and *Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord* (Sir-Tech 1981) (Wada 142). Although the design of these foundational WRPGs were indebted to their tabletop inspirations and took advantage of the computer's ability to store numerical stats and automatically process actions, the way they played differed significantly and abandoned the more dynamic narrative emergence that players enjoy in titles such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. Without TTRPGs serving as a direct

influence, early JRPG developers instead iterated on the affordances of western-developed digital RPGs. From this different cultural perspective, Yuji Horii, creator and lead designer of the *Dragon Quest* series, defined RPGs as "games in which characters develop" (qtd. in Wada 143). This focus on character expression over player expression would become a core principle throughout the franchise and the many other games it inspired. As opposed to TTRPGs and early WRPGs, then, the priority in JRPG design became "set stories" and "character development" (Wada 143). The next section of this article will develop a typology based on the different approaches early WRPGs and JRPGs contributed to RPG design while considering their cross-cultural influence.

2.3.4 Towards a Typology of Videogame Avatars

As the above section illustrated, early WRPGs and JRPGs began to differ in their narrative design due to a divergence in influences and aesthetic ambitions. Bjarnason (2020) has already unpacked how the two genres differ in terms of their "expressive ideal," emphasizing the need to consider "in what manner players are encouraged and allowed to express themselves in particular games," (15) which "is accomplished with various mechanics and motifs such as the silent protagonist, character customization, and meaningful choices and actions" (17). Whereas early Western RPG developers attempted to uphold the player freedom afforded in TTRPGs as an ideal for digital RPGs to strive towards, Japanese developers were interested in transposing manga/anime's pleasure of following colorfully realized characters (Wada 143).

Using Bjarnason's contrasts between WRPG and JRPG design philosophies as a jumping off point, this section of the article will propose genre-neutral terminology that refers to the ways that avatar characterization and interaction options shape players' immersion and narrative engagement in different ways. Three terms will be explored through their implementation in select games:

1) *cypher avatars* that adapt the player-driven expressive ideal of tabletop games;
2) *self-determined avatars* that are fixed in their characterization and narrative path; and
3) *player-determined avatars* that may be relatively fixed in appearance and/or characterization, but that players can also mold through choices.

I should note that my focus here is on the role-playing affordances related to narrative design rather than systems-based party-building options of pure game design. Some RPGs, like *Final Fantasy VIII* (Square 1999), offer robust stat growth and skillset customization options while having fixed character development, so these two aspects of player choice should be separated as they usually serve separate purposes.

Before continuing, it is also worth noting the ontological distinction scholars have drawn between characters and avatars in the context of games: "*character* refers to the portrayal of a consistent persona in a fictional world of a role-playing game"; while *avatar* refers to "the virtual representations of the player" (Bowman and Shrier 2017, 396). In this sense, a character is contextualized as part of the game's story while an avatar is a virtually material entity that may or may not be realized as a fictional character. Players control avatars in sandbox games like *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003) or *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios 2011), but since progress in these games is not tied to story events (in the sense of *fabula*) the

avatars work more as extensions of the mundane self rather than characters with their own narrative agency (Coleman 2011, 84). What differentiates these pure avatars from even the most vapid cypher avatars is that our narrative experience with the latter is tied fictionally and structurally to the videogame's story. Digital avatars do not need to be defined characters, but playable characters are almost always represented as avatars.

My intent in creating this cursory typology is not to suppose all-encompassing categories for addressing every variation of player character that exists, or to draw hard lines on affordances and aesthetics entirely unique to the WRPG or JRPG. Rather, the typology serves as a way of placing the intermingling traditions and innovations of these two sub-genres in conversation with one another. I want to build a more comprehensive understanding of what roleplaying has come to encompass in the context of videogames—as opposed to TTRPGs or LARPs. Since their respective origins, and especially in the last decade or two, JRPG and WRPG conventions have folded into each other and *together* defined the possible variations of characterization, aesthetics, and storytelling we come to associate with digital RPGs and story-driven videogames more broadly. I also don't mean to present these categories as stable absolutes, as there are too many existing minor variations across videogame history that blur their boundaries. Rather, I examine them through their historical ties to early WRPGs, JRPGs, and the permutations that have since encompassed the variety of narrative engagement that videogames offer through the mechanical and narrative framing of their player characters. I will now look at case studies of each of these types of avatars with consideration of their effects on related games' narrative design and the role-playing experience they offer players. My hope is that these categories can help develop

a holistic understanding of role-playing as a mental activity whereby players imaginatively engage with their avatar and a videogame's narrative regardless of genre.

2.3.4.1 Cypher Avatars

Cypher avatars are an attempt by videogame developers to translate the expressive ideal of player freedom and agency from tabletop games into a digital experience. Cypher avatars have become associated with WRPGs, as they originated with the *Ultima* and *Wizardry* series' tabletop influences and were further consolidated with highly successful RPG series such as *Fallout* (Interplay Productions 1997), *Baldur's Gate* (BioWare 1997), and *The Elder Scrolls* (Bethesda Softworks 1994). Games with cypher avatars rarely impose in-depth backstories on the player's character, instead offering a blank slate for the player to project themselves onto or allowing the player to construct their own personality, appearance, and backstory through a character creation process. Cypher avatars usually don't speak for themselves—any dialogue they *do* say is selected by the player. Let's look at some influential examples.

Ultima IV: The Quest of the Avatar (Origin Systems 1985) is often regarded as a significant stepping stone for introducing more complex and nuanced narrative into digital RPGs. Unlike previous games in the series, the player character is no longer positioned simply as a vessel of stats for dungeon crawling gameplay, but someone who must undertake a journey of self-growth. The game begins with the player themself being transported (or *isekai'd*) into the fictional game world of Britannia. The Avatar—whom the player is allowed to name and select the gender of—is therefore framed as an extension of the player. The

player's character class and starting town in the game are determined by a personality quiz that asks moral questions which assign one of eight of the game's core virtues, such as Compassion, Spirituality, or Valor. This layer of personalized choice immediately strengthens the connection between player and their avatar. Upon taking control of the Avatar, the player is given little exposition or guidance, and the game progression is driven by what the player learns by talking with NPCs, the areas of the world they choose to explore, and the order in which they prove themselves in the eight virtues after learning how. This connection between player choice and progression further emphasizes the feeling that any player's journey with *Ultima IV's* is connected to themself and their decisions.

The original *Baldur's Gate* (BioWare 1998) is another prominent example of leaving characterization mainly in the player's hands. After all, it is an explicit attempt to adapt second edition *Dungeons and Dragons* as a videogame. Although the game's story starts your character in a specific context with some fixed plot reveals, the avatar's race, class, and backstory are all fully customizable, and you can even import your own character portraits and voice lines to try to replicate the creative freedom of a *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign. *Baldur's Gate*, among the other WRPGs published by Interplay Productions around the same time, also helped cement the use of dialogue trees in RPG design as a way to allow the player to define their character's personality through narratively significant (or purely flavorful) decisions as they develop their own journey through the game. The personality and character development of the avatar is also tied to their alignment, which is defined along two axes with three levels each. The first is Lawful-Neutral-Chaotic, and the second is Good-Neutral-Evil. The player's alignment, and any shifts in the alignment, determine what NPCs are

willing to travel alongside their avatar as playable companions which also plays into what quest solutions the player character will be influenced to choose.

This greater focus on NPCs in WRPG design only continued to grow. In the late 90s, new WRPGs leaned towards a greater focus on characterization for both NPCs and player characters with titles like *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle Studios 1999) and *Baldur's Gate II* (BioWare 2000), which have more deeply written companion characters for the player to roleplay with. This shift can be attributed to the global success of Square's *Final Fantasy VII* in 1997, as *Planescape: Torment* contains a thank-you to the game in its credits, while one of the lead writers of *Baldur's Gate II* noted that *Final Fantasy VII* pushed him to create more complex characters (qtd. in Peel 2023). It's also worth noting that *Planescape: Torment's* protagonist, The Nameless One, has a more developed backstory than most prior WRPG avatars—making him an early example of a player-determined avatar, which will be discussed further in this section. Therefore, while the foundations of WRPGs influenced the design of JRPGs, the success of JRPGs fed back into the design of more modern WRPGs as they excelled at their own character-driven storytelling.

2.3.4.2 Self-Determined Avatars

Many videogame avatars are constituted by the same fixed identities and character arcs we see in novels and movies, yet they are embodied by a player who willingly internalizes and executes their will in the interest of being immersed in the character. This approach to avatar characterization was popularized in JRPGs with ambitious stories such as Enix's *Dragon Quest IV* (1990) and Square's *Final Fantasy IV* (1991). It can be seen across the Adventure

game genre and has also become common across many Japanese-developed RPGs, as well as western, story-driven AAA videogames like *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013) and the 2018 reimagining of *God of War* (Santa Monica Studio). Outside of RPGs, the self-determined avatar may be the most prominent of these three types in the broader gaming market. While not every game with a self-determined avatar focalizes their characterization in the game's interactivity and progression, JRPGs made great strides in this regard.

In a chapter about the origins of the JRPG, Yuhsuke Koyama (2022) unpacks the common idea that the original *Dragon Quest* and its first two sequels established the foundations of the genre through the relative simplicity of their systems compared to their Western inspirations like *Ultima* and *Wizardry*, as well as the colorful influence of manga/anime aesthetics, and the more linear storytelling of adventure games like Yuji Horii's own *The Portopia Serial Murder Case* in 1983 (23). However, Koyama argues these first three *Dragon Quest* games ultimately occupy a liminal transition period still embedded in WRPG design and insists that *Dragon Quest IV* is the true starting point of a new Japanese genre tradition (31). *Dragon Quest IV* was originally released in the west as *Dragon Warrior IV* (Chunsoft 1992) before the change in naming and localization conventions that began after the Square Enix merger. For the purposes of consistency, I will refer to the more recent and widely used names that first appeared in the 2008 Nintendo DS English version of *Dragon Quest IV*. A major reason behind Koyama's point is that the game's structure is divided into chapters that each showcase the life of a different character, including aging chivalrous knight Ragnar, the rebellious princess Alena, the ordinary merchant Torneko, and the renowned performer twins Meena and Maya. This focus on individual characterization in

the game's narrative design might be regarded as the defining feature of JRPGs rather than linear plot structures or anime/manga aesthetics (Koyama 31). In other words, what defines the JRPG is a reframing of what roleplaying means in videogames. Aside from the silent and generic Hero character the player begins to control in Chapter 5, *Dragon Quest IV's* cast is made up of groundbreaking examples of self-determined avatars whose lives the player is invited to inhabit rather than direct.

Torneko's chapter is the most unique and ambitious for the time, subverting player expectations for immediate action and heroism. It begins with a daily cycle that involves Torneko waking up, going to work, selling weapons to adventurers, and going home to his family. If you speak to his wife in the morning, she gives Torneko a Packed Lunch once per day which can be used to heal and helps contribute to the sense of living a simulation of the merchant's life. The scenario directs players to walk across town to the shop where Torneko works, go behind the counter, and assume the role of a merchant to more established adventurers. In a subversion of RPG conventions, the player leads the sales of the shop's inventory rather than their own. After a day of work, the player can go to the basement of the shop to collect Torneko's salary from his boss and return to his family before another day of work. Torneko is not made out to be a hero himself and conversations with his wife imply that Torneko might desire a more luxurious life for his family. Playing the mundane role of Torneko's life is part of what makes the narrative design of the chapter interesting and innovative, before the player earns enough to finally buy equipment for Torneko to survive battles and seek out better business opportunities in the larger game world. While Torneko's chapter is an extreme case of subverting the typical structure and conventions of RPGs to

offer a more distinct narrative experience about its protagonist, *Dragon Quest IV's* other chapters all attempt to immerse players in the individual lives and circumstances of their protagonists to some extent.

Final Fantasy IV, released a year later, builds on *Dragon Quest IV's* avatar characterization with a plot featuring a dramatic redemption arc for its protagonist, Cecil. The game begins by showing Cecil, the commander of an army called the Red Wings, committing war crimes on behalf of his corrupt king. The player cannot control Cecil in this introduction but the remorse he showcases for his actions before the player takes control initiates a redemption arc that the player gets to embody him through. In typical *Dungeons & Dragons* fashion, every playable character in *Final Fantasy IV* is associated with a character class that determines their unique moveset. Yet the game's narrative design innovates on this typical RPG system in how the characters' personalities and growth are tied to their skills and attributes. For instance, Cecil begins the game as a Dark Knight, which is a class focused on physical attacks and comes with a special 'Darkness' ability. Darkness is a powerful attack that deals damage to every enemy in a given battle, yet costs Cecil some of his own health points (HP). The skill thus represents the aggressive and torturous nature of serving as a Dark Knight, a class that reflects Cecil's inner turmoil through its mechanics. Another character, Tellah, is an old Sage: an experienced spellcaster who has access to a range of supportive White Magic and damaging Black Magic while other magic users only have access to one or the other. He even has immediate access to some of the most powerful spells in the game despite being recruited into the player's party early on. However, as an elderly man he has weak stats both physically and magically, and when he gains a level his HP and

other physical stats sometimes decrease rather than increase due to further aging. Despite having access to many powerful spells, his low total Magic Points (MP) means he can't reliably cast them without quickly burning himself out and being of little use in subsequent battles. Tellah's unique ability, 'Recall,' allows him to randomly cast one of the spells he's forgotten in his old age. The way *Final Fantasy IV* establishes its characters' classes serves a dual function of creating balanced gameplay mechanics and defining these characters' individuality.

In a climactic moment of the game, Cecil must ascend a dungeon called Mount Ordeals where he is told personal revelations await those who reach the summit. Atop the mountain, Cecil undergoes a spiritual, physical, and class transformation from a Dark Knight to a Paladin. In this moment, the player must literally defend against a manifestation of Cecil's dark side (represented in pixels as the character we had been playing as to this point) in a battle to achieve redemption. Cecil's redemption is thus represented visually and systemically as a transition to a Paladin who can take damage for his allies (using the Cover command) and heal them (with simple White Magic). *Final Fantasy IV* thus uses linear storytelling and prioritizes character agency to provide players an interactive way of experiencing Cecil's growth from a flawed antihero to a repentant hero. In doing this, it helped solidify the JRPG as a genre that creatively applies the systems behind WRPGs towards its own flavor of character-driven storytelling.

2.3.4.3 Player-Determined Avatars

As I hinted at earlier, player-determined avatars combine the more fixed characterization of a self-determined avatar with the greater freedom for players to project themselves and shape the game's story that cypher avatars offer. In this sense, they are a combination of the narrative design innovations of Japanese and Western RPGs and have become commonplace in modern RPGs from either region. Player-determined avatars are not created by the player, nor are their storylines entirely pre-written. They tend to put the player in the role of someone who already has a clear place in their world, yet whose personality and journey can be molded to a degree by multi-linear story choices. Joleen Blom (2023) has called these "dynamic game characters" in a study of the way videogames mix player and character agencies, but Blom's definition can also be extended to cypher avatars (10). More specifically, player-determined avatars combine the storytelling strengths of early WRPGs and JRPGs into a level of interaction and representation that videogames are uniquely suited towards. Because of influence from both traditions, I will look at examples of player-determined avatars using games developed in both regions, including *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3* (2006) from Japanese studio Atlus and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) from Polish studio CD Projekt RED.

I will start with *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3*, whose protagonist the player gets to name but is canonically known across transmedia products and in the fan community as Makoto Yuki. Yuki doesn't speak without the player selecting a dialogue choice, which invites projection, but his fixed appearance and backstory characterize him as a quiet loner. Beginning with *Persona 3*, the defining quality of the series (itself a sub-series of *Shin*

Megami Tensei) is a fusion of RPG character progression and dungeon crawling with systems from social simulation games. *Persona 3* allows the player to make a wide variety of dialogue choices when conversing with NPCs throughout its campaigns. Most of these are purely for flavor—in that they don't impact the progression of the games outside of that single conversation—but they still allow the player greater agency in role-playing than that of a self-determined avatar. When talking about the similarly structured *The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel III* (Nihon Falcom 2019), Blom (2022) distinguishes agency in a game's macrostructure from its microstructure. Player decisions that affect the macrostructure lead to different quest endings and fates for characters, while microstructural decisions have less overarching story impacts but still influence the player's unique narrative experience with the game (82-83).

We see this in the confidant system of *Persona 3*, where the player can choose to spend time with certain NPCs and develop relationships with them. However, because the game is structured by a calendar that makes these opportunities finite it is virtually impossible to complete every confidant story in a single playthrough. Thus, the confidants the player chooses to develop relationships with will be determined by who they are the most interested in spending time with and make a given playthrough more individual. The player can level up these relationships (called Social Links) by dedicating more of their in-game time to them and selecting dialogue choices that appeal to the confidant and support them on their journey to grow as individuals. The progression of each Social Link's storyline is ultimately fixed, but the player's experience and responses to that character and storyline can vary in terms of the game's microstructure. On a macrostructural level, the player is faced

with a decision late in the game that determines which of the two endings they get. It is revealed that the end of the world is imminent, and Makoto can choose to either wipe away his recent memories and those of his companions to avoid the anxiety of this revelation—or accept this reality and perhaps try to do something about it. The companions make it clear that they would rather face the truth head on and not sacrifice their memories for peace of mind, but a more anti-social and ambivalent Makoto may prefer the other option. While this choice seems to go against the game's themes valuing friendship and interpersonal connections, its inclusion allows for a deeper commentary on the hollowness of modern society's general apathy.

The Witcher 3's Geralt of Rivia is another player-determined avatar, but his characterization and role-playing affordances differ from *Persona 3's* protagonist. Because *The Witcher* videogames continue the lore and events established in Andrzej Sapkowski's books, Geralt already has a fleshed out personal history, established role in the game's world, and complex relationships with many of the game's characters. He is also fully voiced, although players still get many opportunities to shape their own conversations with NPCs and make many story-altering choices at the microstructural and macrostructural level. When roleplaying as Geralt, the player is invited to make choices *as Geralt* with consideration of his own life, rather than the purely player-motivated framing common with cypher avatars. As a Witcher—a human/monster hybrid made to be able to dispatch monsters in the game's fantasy world more effectively—Geralt is regarded as an outsider by the game's largely xenophobic human population, yet is relied upon by political figures for his services. *The Witcher 3's* story is both personal and political, and its world is reactive to key choices the

player makes during quests to have these decisions feel consistently impactful—whether through slight alterations in the way NPCs treat Geralt, the ending of a certain questline, or reflected in the evolving state of the game world. This sense of player agency through multilinear branching paths is common in games with cypher avatars, but *The Witcher 3's* story applies this degree of variation within the context of a specific character. Every possible variation of an individual questline and the overarching story exists as a plausible decision Geralt could make. The player is just an extension of his will.

Despite the fact that *The Witcher 3's* story has far more narrative variations in its macrostructure than *Persona 3*, the games both use choices to offer roleplaying engagement. If we look at roleplaying primarily from the perspective of a player participating in their character's narrative development—whether it occurs on the level of macrostructure or microstructure—both these games use dialogue choices to facilitate player expression. No matter how minor a choice's impact may be in terms of explicit plot variations, the point of providing the player any sense of agency is that "it allows the player to create their own individual narrative experience" (Blom 2022, 89). Any type of roleplaying affordance is meant to involve the player more personally in the narrative that unfolds as they play, even if it all leads to the same overall conclusion. In *Cybertext* (1997), Espen Aarseth divides player decisions (or "keyholes," as he calls them) into "two different functional kinds: those that advance the strategic position of the player and those that don't. Only the first are gaps in the quest for the solution of the game, but on a 'narrative' level there is no discernible difference" (111). The nonlinear nature of gameplay within the fixed bounds of design necessarily distinguishes 'useful' versus 'useless' interaction in games, meaning the player's

attempts to exert agency can either lead to progressing the game (i.e. leading closer to the ending) or a simple detour from doing so. Yet, although both are not equal in terms of gameplay functionality, they are equal in terms of narrative functionality. Player-determined avatars are built with the understanding that a videogame is always a compromise between fixed events and player variance. Regardless of how far they lean towards the designed linearity of character agency or the emergent expression of player agency, these avatars wield the strength of the medium having learnt from the narrative design experiments that early WRPGs and JRPGs brought forward.

2.3.5 Conclusion

By defining these three types of avatar characterization, I hope to have addressed the historical innovations and strengths of both WRPG and JRPG conventions. Although both genres have unique histories and design philosophies, they are fundamentally intertwined and have together shaped the storytelling potential of RPGs and videogames more broadly. At the same time, I hope this terminology offers regionally neutral alternatives to the way we can talk about the different approaches to narrative design and roleplaying that *any game* from *any region* can adopt for their game's storytelling. Moreover, the terms move away from the nomenclature of RPGs and can be applied to think about the narrative design of other story-driven games and genres.

For instance, we can see how the Western-developed action/adventure/RPG hybrid *God of War* (2018) tells an emotional, linear story about its protagonist Kratos—a self-determined avatar anti-hero the player is invited to embody. There are no opportunities for

the player to shape Kratos' story with their choices, as we are instead meant to understand him and his relationship with his son, Atreus, through observing fixed dialogues and working with Atreus' AI through the game's exploration and combat segments. In contrast, the Japanese-developed *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware 2011) and its sequels feature cypher avatars that the player is meant to imaginatively project onto during character creation (through options such as Class selection, which also has background descriptions that pertain to the game's larger world) and can be further characterized through interactions with NPCs, covenant allegiances the player can join, the equipment they choose to wear, and dramatic use of the game's gesture system. Finally, narrative-driven adventure games like Telltale Games' 2012 title *The Walking Dead* and its sequels do not have the systems or typical structures of RPGs, yet feature extensive roleplaying opportunities through branching dialogue trees with player-determined avatars like Lee Everett and Clementine. A core part of *The Walking Dead's* gameplay involves selecting a dialogue or action from a list of choices that will determine the overall welfare of the group the player is traveling with, the opinions different NPCs have of the player character, and their overall story arcs.

Each of these cases shows how reductive and misleading it can be to associate ideas like linear storytelling or character creation systems with entire regions or genres of game. This is, unfortunately, how the JRPG has been conceived by many western gaming media outlets and players. I'd like to reiterate that this typology is not meant to be an encompassing study of the different degrees of avatar characterization that have been used in videogames as a whole. A complete typology would require close analysis of a larger corpus of narratively ambitious games from more genres. Rather, my focus in this article was a cross-analysis of

the defining narrative design features of JRPGs and WRPGs. Further research on this topic might consider how this typology could be extended to address more subtleties in avatar characterization and roleplaying affordances by looking more closely at other genres or various titles within the same genre. This could provide scholars and game developers more precise language for articulating a game's approach to narrative design and a more thorough understanding of these design innovations across videogame history.

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2.4 Paper 3: Gaming vs Roleplaying: How Trophies Impact the Aesthetic Experience of Videogames

2.4.1 Introduction

Single-player videogames occupy an interesting space in the broader corpus of games. They emerged between two design styles prevalent in the late 1970s and early 1980s: the score-

based and dexterous challenge focus of arcade games, and the stronger emphasis on worldbuilding and simulated experience in text adventures and role-playing games (RPGs), both of which were influenced by tabletop games. In the former, the pleasure of the game comes from the repetitive performance of a challenge and the sense of mastery that comes from gradual accomplishments (e.g. reaching a level the player has never gotten to before). With the latter, there is notably still a challenging goal to accomplish—there must be, or the game could not be completed and the journey it offers therefore never resolved. Yet, there is also a secondary pleasure that can be associated with the aesthetic practice of roleplaying: the experience of being engrossed in a virtual world through the identity of an avatar and inhabiting it earnestly (in-character) through fictional and mechanical engagement.[2] Theories of roleplaying and its application for identity experimentation and formation have since been well explored in relation to the interpersonal context of tabletop games (TTRPGs)[3] and live-action roleplaying games (LARPs).[4] With TTRPGs, a group of players embark together on a shared fictional journey structured through the lore and gameplay systems laid out in a rulebook and the narration of an omniscient game master (GM), while LARP players act out fictional scenarios in a physically embodied manner using real-world locations as their play space. In both cases, a shared narrative is established and developed by a group of players acting out an alternate identity in a narratively and/or ludically structured format.

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[2] Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (University of Chicago Press, 1983), 4.
[3] Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games* (McFarland & Company, 2010).
[4] David Simkins. 2015. *The Arts of LARP: Design, Literacy, Learning and Community in Live-Action Role Play* (McFarland & Company, 2015).

However, there has been less research on how roleplaying manifests in videogames, particularly single-player ones. In this solitary, digitally mediated context, *roleplaying* takes the form of an "internal play" that occurs as a silent interaction between a system with fixed parameters and a player working through (and sometimes around) that system as they engage physically and imaginatively with its representations.[5] This subjective, potentially subversive engagement with one's gameplay stands in contrast to *gaming*: the traditional, task-driven consumption of videogames where pleasure is derived from executing clear objectives and receiving a tangible sense of reward.[6] In other words, the meaning of gaming is in the fun and feeling of mastery that a game's necessarily restrictive design provides, while the meaning of roleplaying emerges from the player subject's fictional engagement and interpretation of these design elements and their own gameplay. On one level, these are simply different ways of approaching and enjoying gameplay; yet, gaming is actively encouraged by industry trends, such as achievement systems, making it the de facto, normalized way of enjoying a videogame.

This paper questions whether the pursuit of achievements (or 'trophies' as they are called on the Playstation Network) in a videogame directs player engagement to be more gamified and out-of-character. Gamification is "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts" and is often used to incentivize intentional behaviors through a reward

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[5] Jaako Stenros and Tanja Sihvonen, "Like Seeing Yourself in the Mirror? Solitary Role-Play as Performance and Pretend Play." *Game Studies* 20, no. 4 (2020) http://gamestudies.org/2004/articles/stenros_sihvonen

[6] John Vanderhoef and Matthew Thomas Payne, "Press X to Wait: The Cultural Politics of Slow Game Time in *Red Dead Redemption 2*," *Game Studies* 22, no. 3 (2022) https://gamestudies.org/2203/articles/vanderhoef_payne

system.[7] By offering rewards earned through yet external to diegetic gameplay, trophies introduce an additional layer of this sort of gameful engagement that can change the way players interact with a videogame and perceive their purpose interacting with it. This form of engagement, epitomized in *trophy hunting*,[8] prioritizes ludic completionism over other modes of involvement videogames offer, such as affective, narrative, and spatial involvements that stem as much (or more) from a game's aesthetics as its systems or challenges.[9] While the inclusion of trophies is not inherently problematic—and can serve productive functions such as guiding players to experiment with a game's mechanics or offering an extra-diegetic set of goals for players who want to spend more time with the game[10]—it does embed a corporatized emphasis on Csikszentmihalyi's concept of *flow*, an ideologically charged "challenge-based immersion" based on intrinsic mastery, at the core of the play experience.[11] Csikszentmihalyi popularized the concept of flow as a philosophy and practice that paves the way for human happiness through a feedback loop of voluntary, challenging action and achievement that he calls *optimal experience*.[12] Achievement systems encourage the pursuit of this form of accomplishment through its representation on player profiles (e.g. Playstation Network, Xbox Live, Steam, etc.) which feeds into capitalist notions of merit as measured through the number and difficulty of achievements earned. While my intent here is not to

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[7] Sebastian Deterding et al, "From Game Design to Elements to Gamefulness: Defining Gamification," *CHI 2011 Gamification Workshop Proceedings*, 9.
[8] Mikael Jakobsson, "The Achievement Machine: Understanding Xbox 360 Achievements in Gaming Practices," *Game Studies* 11, no. 1 (2011) https://gamestudies.org/1101/articles/jakobsson
[9] Gordon Calleja, *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation*, (The MIT Press, 2011), 43-44.
[10] Jakobsson, "The Achievement Machine."
[11] Braxton Soderman, *Against Flow: Video Games and the Flowing Subject*, (The MIT Press, 2021), 148.
[12] Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, (HarperCollins, 1990), 3-4.

demonize the very existence of trophies or players who enjoy earning them as a core part of their player identity, I do think it is worth considering their place and effects on the larger social, economic, and aesthetic aspects of games culture. How does the imposition of trophies exacerbate traditionally masculine and capitalist engagements with videogames? What alternative forms of engagement does this pursuit obscure?

This chapter will examine gaming and role-playing as aesthetically conflicting approaches in terms of what they seek from single-player gameplay. While gaming's drive is towards out-of-character completionism and mastery epitomized but not limited to trophy hunting, roleplaying embraces in-character interactivity focused on cultivating the player's imaginative investment in the fictional game world.[13] Roleplaying engages in a form of what Ruberg calls *queer play*, which embraces subjective player desire, interpretation, and "the powerful act of playing the 'wrong' way" over embedded ludic reward structures in approaching gameplay.[14] In contrast to the authorial expression roleplaying can provide players, trophies make them into an ideal consumer by assigning them specific goals with a corporately and socially gamified sense of reward—the completion of which demands extended playtime and defines the meaning of the gaming experience. Ultimately, they are both valid ways of enjoying a game, but their ideological reverberations on gaming culture and effects on player experience deserve further investigation.

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[13] Mike Pohjola. "Manifesto of the Turku School," in *As Larp Grows Up – Theory and Methods in Larp*, ed. Morten Gade, Mikkel Sander, and Line Thorup, (Projektgruppen, 2003), 34.
[14] Bo Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, (New York University Press, 2019), 18.

The chapter will begin by unpacking the gaming/roleplaying dichotomy through game studies scholarship surrounding gamification, flow theory, and queer play. I will then carry this framework into an analysis of *Undertale*[15]—a narratively ambitious indie game that was originally released on PC without trophies but had to incorporate them into its PS4 port—to consider why a developer may want to avoid integrating achievements based on the thematic or aesthetic intent of their game. The chapter ends with an analysis of achievements in the AAA open-world game *Red Dead Redemption 2*[16] focused on parsing which trophies support gameful vs roleplay engagement. These analyses will reflect on what achievements generally ask of players and how their pursuit can override or support the less goal-oriented and more aesthetic practice of roleplaying. By offering a contrasted understanding of both gaming and roleplaying, my intent is to shed light on how extra-diegetic reward systems can both define and obscure the perceived worth of gameplay.

2.4.2 Gaming, Roleplaying, and Achievement Systems

The tension between play (or *paidia*) and game (or *ludus*) is perhaps the oldest and most commonly explored dichotomy in game studies scholarship. While play is usually defined as a free, voluntary activity whose boundaries and frames for actions are emergent and malleable, games function around rule-based systems premised on players' acceptance of fixed affordances and constraints.[17] Walther defines play as "an open-ended territory in which make-believe and world-building are crucial factors" while games "are confined areas

[15] Toby Fox, *Undertale*, (Toby Fox, 2015).
[16] Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, (Rockstar Games, 2018).
[17] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (University of Illinois Press, 2001), 6.

that challenge the interpretation and optimizing of rules and tactics—not to mention time and space."[18] Roleplay, as the name suggests, has elements of the free-form, improvisational nature of play, yet the possibility space provided by the identity and toolkit the player inhabits are determined by the fixed fictional and mechanical bounds provided by the game.[19] Scholars studying analogue forms of RPGs, such as LARPs and TTRPGs, have defined role-playing as "immersion to an outside consciousness ('a character') and interacting with its surroundings."[20] In his groundbreaking study of RPG culture, Gary Alan Fine underscores two contrasting approaches to playing a game: "The gamer plays the game as [them]self, while the player who wishes to lose [them]self to the fantasy is the true role-player—[they play] the character."[21] While videogames do not require the player to roleplay their avatar for gameplay to take shape and progress, solitary roleplaying is a unique experience that deserves its own study by putting players in the simultaneous position of actor and spectator.[22] Especially in videogames, roleplay can only work as a player-driven extension of the primary gameplay and narrative elements defined and structured by the game design.

Roleplaying is a fixation on narrative play that occurs while gaming, yet has the player temporarily focus on elements other than progression, mastery, or other aspects of ludic involvement. Roleplay is thus a detour from the ludically structured, flow-centered

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[18] Bo Kampmann Walther, "Playing and Gaming: Reflections and Classifications," *Game Studies* 3, no. 1. (2003) https://www.gamestudies.org/0301/walther/
[19] James Paul Gee, *Unified Discourse Analysis: Language, Reality, Virtual Worlds, and Video Games*, (Routledge, 2015), 18.
[20] Pohjola. "Manifesto of the Turku School," 34.
[21] Fine, *Shared Fantasy,* 207.
[22] Stenros and Sihvonen, "Solitary Role-Play as Performance and Pretend Play."

pursuit of gaming. It can be pleasurable, but it also defers ludic satisfaction for a form of play where the 'reward' is a deeper sense of immersion in the game world and/or player character. Like trophy hunting, it is a secondary form of engagement for the player and, like trophy hunting, it can become a significant determinant of a game's meaningfulness as an experience—although in a quite different manner. Walther further notes that "play seems to focus on investigations of semantics, since the task is, not only to measure its space, but furthermore to elaborate upon its modes of interpretation and means for re-interpretation. Not only do we explore a world while playing. We are also driven by its potential meaning and the stories we can invent in that respect."[23] As an extension of play focused on fictional engagement and the affective qualities of a game, roleplaying doubles as a mode of interpretation. It is a way for players to make sense of their gameplay through the framework of a narrative they are experiencing diegetically *as a character*.

This interpretive work is both generated in the player's imagination as they engage with the representations they see on screen and reflected in the way they interact with a game mechanically. Every way in which a player performs during gameplay that doesn't boil down to actions performed with an established objective in mind—whether in the form of quests or achievements—can be understood as a playful engagement within an otherwise gamified system. In defining videogames as actions, Alexander Galloway questions whether stopping to stare at a sunset in *Shenmue,*[24] without any active input from the player, qualifies as

[23] Walther, "Playing and Gaming."
[24] Sega-AM2, *Shenmue*, (Sega, 1999).

gameplay.[25] *Shenmue* is a groundbreaking open-world game with a fully simulated day/night cycle, NPC schedules, and attention to detail for representing its small-town Japanese setting. *Shenmue* and the many games it inspired (such as *Red Dead Redemption 2*) are still structured around mandatory gameful tasks, but the explorable, living play spaces they offer allow players to engage with the world at their own pace and enjoy simply existing in their richly detailed virtual settings. Galloway's question exposes the tension between playing and gaming, particularly when it comes to videogames. While playing is a search for semantics, "gaming" is a search for structure: a concern for the next task that concretely progresses the game.[26] There is nothing gameful about stopping to watch a sunset in *Shenmue* as it is free of mechanical action and is structurally a detour from completing any of the game's assigned objectives. Yet there is something to be said about its playful nature when considered in the larger scope of gameplay, understood not as a series of active inputs but a holistic audiovisual and haptic experience.[27] This moment of engaged pause to stare at an in-game sunset could only come about in the course of a player's natural experience of the game (i.e. adhering to the structural demands of gaming). Perhaps the player has just completed an objective and is taking a break by strolling through the world when a nice view of the sunset presented itself. Focusing on this view and choosing not to press any buttons is itself an act—a creative, playful one born out of a desire the game cultivated for the player who seized it as something aesthetically or narratively meaningful. The roleplayer's priority is to maximize

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[25] Alexander Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 10.
[26] Walther, "Playing and Gaming."
[27] Brendan Keogh, *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames*. (The MIT Press, 2018), introduction.

their "narrative immersion" (or what Calleja calls *transportation*) as a character inhabiting a game world while the gamer seeks "ludic immersion" (what Calleja refers to as *absorption*) through continuous challenge-based engagement.[2829] Because videogames offer both tactile challenges to execute and fictive worlds to invest oneself in, these phenomena are fundamentally tied to the ways players enjoy gameplay and can mix in productive and interesting ways. However, achievement systems appeal much more strongly to increasing one's ludic immersion through providing extra conditions for extending a player's sense of flow.

Videogame achievement systems, such as Xbox Live's Gamerscore or Playstation Network's Trophies, are implemented to amplify and expand elements of *gameful design*, which directs users towards gameful rather than playful modes of engagement.[30] Like gamification, gameful design is concerned with offering a structure of game elements for intense and prolonged motivation and, in the case of videogames, consumption.[31] Lu et al. consider the ways that "games can also be gamified" seeing as these achievement systems directly influenced the development of gamification tools for non-gaming contexts.[32] Achievement systems and the user profiles tied to them create a social network where one's gameplay history is recorded in the form of metrics and the extensive set of challenges and

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[28] Marie-Laure Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories: Toward a Poetics of Interactive Narrative," *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 1, (2009) 53-54.
[29] Calleja, *In-Game*, 22-23.
[30] Sebastian Deterding et al, "From Game Design to Elements to Gamefulness 11. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273947177_Gamification_Toward_a_definition
[31] Deterding et al. ""From Game Design to Elements to Gamefulness," 9.
[32] Chien Lu et al., "What Makes a Trophy Hunter? An Empirical Analysis of Reddit Discussions," *GamiFIN Conference 2020*,

actions covered by each game's trophy list. Ultimately, whatever potential for reflection and self-understanding these profiles might offer, as Medler considers,[33] is compromised by their function as gamified consumer directives and means of collecting player data.[34] Just because a player is motivated by spatial exploration or narrative roleplaying does not mean they will want to pursue trophies such as uncovering every area of an open-world map (e.g. *Assassin's Creed Origins'*[35] "I Know My Land" trophy) or completing all of a game's side-quests (e.g. *Red Dead Redemption 2's* "Lending a Hand" trophy).

Waszkiewicz and Kominiarczuk argue that the aesthetic and functional separation between quests and achievements is arbitrary and propose a model of "objective-based reward systems" that allows diegetic game goals (e.g. quests) and extra-diegetic game goals (e.g. trophies) to be categorized together in an expanded framing of what "the game itself" encompasses.[36] The limitation here is that the model equates the more intricate, aesthetic framing of something like RPG quests with the way a mobile app or massively multiplayer online game (MMO) rewards users for recruiting friends. On one hand, they are indeed equal in that in both cases a piece of software is providing direction for engagement and acknowledging the user with a reward for interacting in a particular way. On the other hand, the expression of meaningfulness or subjective nuance behind the framing of an RPG's

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[33] Ben Medler, "Player Dossiers: Analyzing Gameplay Data as a Reward," *Game Studies* 11, no. 1 (2011) https://gamestudies.org/1101/articles/medler
[34] Chris Hecker, "Achievements Considered Harmful?" *Chris Hecker* (2011), https://www.chrishecker.com/Achievements_Considered_Harmful%3F
[35] Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin's Creed Origins*, (Ubisoft, 2017).
[36] Waszkiewicz, Agata and Mateusz Kominiarczuk. "Towards a Model of Objective-Based Reward Systems." *Game Studies* 21, no. 1, (2021), https://gamestudies.org/2101/articles/waszkiewicz_kominiarczuk.

narrative design, including how it supplements the player experience and can shift the perceived meaning or value of the goal is unaccounted for. In other words, it is a model that focalizes the purely ludic side of a game's reward structure at the expense of the more playful, aesthetic side of game design. Videogames are, after all, an "all at once" media synthesis of audiovisual-haptic elements to which narrative representations and designed procedural interactions are supplements rather than ontologically crucial features.[37] The line between an intricately presented videogame set-piece and a gamified feature on an app may be thin on a purely functional level, but videogame development devotes so much labour and resources beyond the purely functional that deserves to be considered in the scope of the larger experience a game can offer. With *Red Dead Redemption 2*, for example, the developers prioritized the creation of a naturalistic and realistic Old West world through the possibility of emergent, contextualized interactions with every NPC and detailed wildlife simulation—both of which require extensive work by animators and programmers yet are separate from the game's scripted, progression-related gameplay missions.[38] This level of detail is more about creating a world than creating a game in the purest, strictest sense of the word.

Achievements have long existed in a variety of forms as an extra, non-diegetic set of directives for gameful engagement, but their incorporation as an imposed, networked metagame system presents to players an idea about what videogames are and how they

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[37] Keogh, *A Play of Bodies*, introduction.
[38] Keza MacDonald, "Get real! Behind the scenes of Red Dead Redemption 2 – the most realistic video game ever made," *The Guardian*, October 24, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/games/2018/oct/24/get-real-behind-the-scenes-of-red-dead-redemption-2-the-most-realistic-video-game-ever-made.

should be enjoyed. In response to scholars and developers who consider whether the ubiquitous incorporation of achievements would compromise the "pure" experience of the game itself, Jakobsson provides an astute framing of achievement systems that compares them to an MMO overlayed atop the diegetic game itself.[39] This productively accounts for the way that achievement systems are both an integrated part of the game yet structurally apart from it. Players can use their real-world agency to decide the extent to which they want to engage with trophies—whether through trying to ignore them, casually referring to them as a way of extending engagement or collecting them as the primary impetus for playing the game at all. However, the achievement metagame is always functioning in the background as "a deterministic system dictating to [players] what to do".[40] A metagame involves the playing of a game for a purpose or reward separate from what the game itself requires, stemming instead from the player's extrinsic motivations.[41] In this sense, both roleplaying and trophy hunting are metagaming practices, but the latter is actively encouraged and commodified through the achievement system.

Fickle notes how Caillois' influential play/game (*paidia*/*ludus*) distinction was originally established with a problematic cultural bias, where the former (which roughly translates from Greek as childish amusement) is associated with primitive societies while the more complex, rule-based structures required for *ludus* are a mature, civilized form of play

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[39] Jakobsson, "The Achievement Machine."
[40] Ibid.
[41] Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMiuex, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making,*
and Breaking Videogames. (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 2.

(129).[42] This idea is legitimized by the game industry's proliferation of achievement systems and the meritocratic gaming capital tied to their appearance on player profiles. In this social network of players, the number of games a player consumes, and the extent to which they consume them, is assigned a visible and shareable worth. The achievement system encompasses the playing of all videogames it pertains to without being an integral part of their design. It also serves a meritocratic social function whereby its rewards are reflected in a player's online profile, an entity that exists separate from any individual game's diegesis. Soderman discusses the way that "flow theory uses the concept as an *ideology*, one that privileges individuality over social collectivities… and action over critical examination".[43] Thus flow, and in turn gameful design built to facilitate it, is not a politically neutral force but one that is used "to ensure that players continue to consume the product… a marketable ideology".[44] Ruberg similarly critiques the way that unreflective fun and mastery is centered by the game industry and normative gamer audiences, proliferating an "anti-intellectual logic" where games "cannot be seen as any kind of meaningful reflection on society" or their players.[45] Roleplaying and other "counteraffects" in playstyle or interpretation destabilize this gameful status quo and expand the boundaries by which videogames can be meaningful for different players with different desires.[46] Even if players have the option to ignore achievements or control settings regarding what extent they appear on the console interface,

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[42] Tara Fickle, *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities*. (NYU Press, 2019), 129.
[43] Soderman, *Against Flow*, 5-6.
[44] Soderman, *Against Flow*, 9.
[45] Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, 60.
[46] Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, 177.

participation is unavoidable. What does this ubiquity of achievement systems tell us about the ways corporations like Microsoft and Sony want us to engage with games on their platforms? What is there to be said about why certain game developers, like *Undertale's* Toby Fox, wouldn't want to include them?

2.4.3 Satirizing the Gamer through the Forced Inclusion of Trophies in *Undertale*

In the interest of cultivating a mindset for roleplaying, some developers might prefer not to implement achievements into their games. Perhaps they would rather players experience the possibility space and parse the meaning of their game intuitively and individually rather than through a list of rewarded tasks, and fear that the presentation of these extra-diegetic goals could dictate a playstyle that goes against the game's intended experience. Toby Fox's indie hit *Undertale* is a narratively and thematically dense game originally released on PC without achievements, as the Steam platform does not mandate them. When it was ported to the PS4, however, Fox had to include trophies as it is required for a game to be certified by Sony. *Undertale* therefore serves as an interesting case to think about why a developer might not want to include achievements with their game. Moreover, the trophies that did end up in the PS4 version of *Undertale* are designed to poke fun at the idea of achievements rewarding their players for trivial or unavoidable actions.

Undertale presents itself as a conventional, 8-bit styled RPG in the tradition of *Dragon Quest* and other classical turn-based Japanese RPGs from the late 1980s and early 1990s. This veneer is crucial as it helps bury the subversive elements of the game's narrative design that the player is meant to discover for themself. The game has two main routes—

referred to as the "pacifist" and "genocide" routes by the community—that lead to significant variations in the game's narrative and overall gameplay experience. A "neutral" route refers to any variation of playthrough that does not follow the extreme, particular guidelines of the other two. Crucially, the requirements for completing the pacifist and genocide routes are never overtly communicated to the player. In fact, the game's surface-level adherence to RPG conventions is meant to obscure them. Like many RPGs, *Undertale* has an experience point (EXP) and leveling (LV) system that rewards players with stat increases for defeating monsters in battle.[47] An early NPC the player encounters, Toriel, suggests that the player spare monsters (using the Mercy command) rather than kill them (using the Fight command) although the former approach does not provide experience points for leveling. A pacifist player will therefore remain at Level 1 the entire game, which defies standard RPG systems design that measures progression through gradual increases in character stats. Although this is an early hint that playing as a pacifist or a killer might affect the game's progression beyond the player character's stats, it is communicated solely within *Undertale's* diegesis as a suggestion from an NPC rather than a goal clearly framed as such with the promise of a certain reward or access to different content. This is because *Undertale* wants the player to perceive the world's characters as people rather than means to an end. To play as a pacifist means to respect Toriel's well-meaning request. On the other hand, a player may fall into the habit of killing monsters to level up because other RPGs have conditioned them to do so, and

[47] Near the end of the game, another character reveals that these commonly used acronyms actually stand for Execution Points (EXP) and Level of Violence (LV) in the game's diegesis.

they value this gameful engagement over the roleplaying Toriel asks from them. In any case, *Undertale* wants the player to make their own decision based on the contradiction present in the mix of narrative messaging and procedural rhetoric in front of them.

If the player completes the game without killing a single monster (by instead using the non-violent 'Act' command to convince them not to fight), they will experience a mostly wholesome journey where they befriend the game's large cast of diverse monsters because they treated them as individuals. The genocide route offers an alternative, much darker roleplaying experience whose thematic intent would be spoiled by support from achievements. What it asks from the player is devious and, importantly, easily avoidable. Rather than simply kill every monster the player encounters, progressing the genocide route requires that the player linger in the game's regions and continue killing monsters until no more appear. This is signalled by a change in the music, with the "genocide" version of each region's song being an atonal, pitch-shifted remix of its standard version meant to create a horror-like atmosphere where the player becomes the game's main villain. Completing the genocide route calls notions of completionism or mastery into question, as it plays into these design notions while offering a deliberately repetitive and ludically unrewarding experience. The player character quickly becomes so powerful that they are able to kill all but two monsters (who are bosses exclusive to the route) in a single attack. To complete the genocide route is an act the game itself questions. Why do it? Is it because you want to see all the story content? *Epistemic immersion* is one of Ryan's sub-categories of narrative immersion, related to the player's investment to learn more about the story's background and the game world's

lore.[48] The genocide route asks players if inflicting cruelty on the world's inhabitants are worth this curiosity, turning the pursuit of mastery (reaching the game's max level) and desire to experience all the game's content into narrative horror. In this instance, ludic immersion is subverted and reframed for narrative immersion, being "simultaneously no fun and playful, unpleasant and pleasurable."[49] The presence of trophies tied to the completion of either the pacifist or genocide route could risk cheapening the emotions that motivated players to pursue and complete them. The pacifist route is meant to elicit authentic compassion for a world of virtual monsters. The genocide route is meant to have players wrestle with feelings of guilt as they work through tedious and emotionally draining gameplay to experience another side of the game's story and gameplay content.

Undertale's trophies do not pertain to any aspect of this layered narrative design, likely because creator Toby Fox does not want anything outside of the game's diegesis to influence the way a player is moved to spare or kill the monsters they encounter throughout the game. Instead, the trophies trivialize the application of achievement systems by making their conditions unrelated to anything interesting about the game and the choices players can make within it. *Undertale* has 30 trophies total. 10 of these trophies relate to reaching mandatory points of progression regardless of route. They are unmissable and require no extra engagement from the player. 15 are named "Dognation" and require the player to donate an escalating amount of the game's currency to the game's Dog Shrine, from 2G to

[48] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 55.
[49] Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, 177.

350G. The Dog Shrine was added into the Playstation port of the game and serves no purpose other than to collect donations that reward the player with these trophies. Earning the trophies requires the player to fight more battles than they likely normally would to earn extra gold purely for this extra-diegetic reward. The last four trophies required to earn the game's Platinum trophy (the final one for obtaining all others) are titled as a playful commentary on this forced incorporation of the achievement system, listed in order as: "Don't Worry, I have Lots of Ideas for Trophies, "Like Getting Items," "Or Getting More Items," and "Help Me, I'm Out of Ideas." They give the player the trivial task of obtaining items, from 1-4 respectively. Finally, the Platinum trophy—the sum of this menial effort—is simply named, "Don't You Have Anything Better to Do?"

In the same spirit as Soderman's critique of the unreflective nature of flow, Toby Fox is prompting players pursuing the game's Platinum trophy to question why they would spend their time on earning trivial, unengaging rewards. It's worth noting that the bland design and mocking tone of these trophies have not dissuaded achievement hunters. 42.89% of *Undertale* players who are users on PSNProfiles—a community of trophy hunters—achieved the Platinum, while 14.2% of total Playstation players have.[50] In both cases, these percentages are well above average for a game in which the Platinum trophy is not earned solely by reaching the game's credits. Amassing Platinum trophies is the highest level of achievement for trophy hunters and *Undertale*'s attempt to prompt reflection through them is

[50] "Undertale Trophy Guide," PSNProfiles, accessed October 1, 2024, https://psnprofiles.com/trophies/6487-undertale

apparently superseded by the relative ease of its achievement. While this satirical trophy design might spur some players like Contaldi towards genuine reflection,[51] the nature of the achievement system means this extra-diegetic provocation for critical distance is nullified through its perceived value in a systemized metagame that (by design) can overshadow the potential subjective value of the game design itself.

Undertale's narrative design thus calls into question the idea that diegetic quests and extra-diegetic achievements are interchangeable in the experience they offer players. Although the line between intrinsic and extrinsic motivators can be arbitrary and difficult to determine in user studies,[52] single-player games can be designed and written in a way to incite certain feelings and have the player ask questions about the meaning of the object and their experience with it. The aesthetic presentation of a game, and the roleplaying that can stem from it, means that the deliberately framed interaction and progression of some videogames cannot be equated to the impersonal pursuit of objectives through a gamified reward system. This is not to say that trophies can only ever thwart the thematic intent and narrative design of single-player games. Some game developers have attempted to use trophies to build on the thematic aspects of the game rather than detract from them, such as *Prey's* trophies that prompt reflection on the game world's nature as a simulation[53] or trophies in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* offering commentary on nuclear

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[51] Lou Contaldi, "Undertale Held a Mirror Up to My PS4 Trophy Addiction, and It's My Greatest Shame," *Dual Shockers*, August 1, 2018, https://www.dualshockers.com/undertale-ps4-dog-shrine-trophy/
[52] Ben Medler, "Player Dossiers: Analyzing Gameplay Data as a Reward," *Game Studies* 11, no. 1 (2011) https://gamestudies.org/1101/articles/medler
[53] Dan Staines et al., "Trophies, Typhon, and Trolley Problems: Moral Play and Playing Well in Prey," *Well Played* 11, no. 1 (2022).

disarmament.[54] However, the ideal meanings of the trophies addressed in these analyses presume an ethically engaged reflective player unseduced by the metagame's promise of tangible rewards. In the next section, I will consider how some of *Red Dead Redemption 2's* trophies can direct players to gameful engagement while others have the potential to facilitate roleplaying.

2.4.4 Tensions Between Gaming and Role-Playing in *Red Dead Redemption 2's* Trophies

I chose *Red Dead Redemption 2* as the case study for this section as a contrast to *Undertale*, being a AAA, mass-market videogame whose design attempts to balance traditional, gameful open-world engagement with an aesthetically and mechanically innovative emphasis on roleplay. Beginning with *Grand Theft Auto IV* and including the original *Red Dead Redemption*, Rockstar Games took advantage of the new technical possibilities of the Xbox 360 and Playstation 3 through incorporating more weighty physics that led to more realistic game feel and grounded narratives. With their first game developed for the following console generation, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Rockstar even further amplified this sense of mechanical and narrative realism into its narrative design. Protagonist Arthur Morgan's default walking speed is unconventionally slow and his running speed awkwardly fast in comparison, asking players to prioritize their own sense of immersion in the world and roleplay over efficient movement between objective markers in the sandbox environment.

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[54] Ryan Scheiding and Dan Staines, "Ruptures of Design: Trophies, Live Service Games, & Anti-Nuclear Metacommentary in Metal Gear Solid V," *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 16, no. 1 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw_00090_1

The act of picking up items from a cabinet—a common action that occurs instantly in most other games—is fully animated at a realistic speed. As Vanderhoef and Payne discuss in their analysis of the game's deliberately slow pace and feel, many players reacted negatively to *Red Dead Redemption 2's* tradeoff of gameful efficiency for realistic simulation: "When games introduce guardrails that place hard limits on game mastery—be it through space, animation, mechanics, or sprawling narratives—it often forecloses demonstrations of hegemonic gaming performance."[55] The authors refer to this phenomenon of a standardized game tempo prioritizing flow as *hegemonic game time*, which measures the quality of gameplay by its ability to optimize flow and its impulses of conventional fun and mastery.[56] As an objective-oriented meta-game, the purpose of achievements is to expand the potential for hegemonic game time into any videogame experience. The design and feel of *Red Dead Redemption 2* defies the standard of hegemonic game time through its emphasis on slow play and roleplay, but were the developers able to translate this intent into the design of the game's trophies?

As an open-world game, *Red Dead Redemption 2* is structured around a set of required story missions that progress the game and a wider degree of optional content that provides options for more fulsome engagement with its world. Based on my experience playing the game and analyzing its trophies, I found trophies that ask the player to complete, or nearly complete, a whole section of the game's content skew towards gameful

[55] Vanderhoef and Payne, "Press X to Wait."
[56] Ibid.

engagement, while those that ask for minimal participation in a specific aspect of the game's open world could encourage deeper roleplaying. The aforementioned "Lending a Hand" trophy, which requires a player to complete all of the game's honor-based side-quests, serves as a motivator to experience more of the game's narrative content but interferes with a natural roleplaying experience. Since many of the quests are only available in certain chapters, and some will require a positive honor level (the 'good' side of the game's binary morality system) to attempt, the trophy requirements skew players to play as a strictly honorable Arthur and linger in each chapter to search for and complete all available quests rather than move at their own desired pace. One could interpret this as the developers influencing the player to roleplay an honorable Morgan, but its requirements go beyond this and ultimately encourage a playstyle of gameful completionism as much (if not more) than narrative immersion. The same might be said of the "Extreme Personality" trophy, which requires the player to reach either Arthur's maximum or minimum honor level by making decisions that serve only one or the other moral extreme instead of roleplaying their own version of the character in an emergent, moment-by-moment manner. Other trophies that even more explicitly appeal to a gamer playstyle include "Gold Rush," which demands optimal performance of story missions and thereby distills the experience they offer into perfection achieved through repetition; and "Best in the West," which requires 100% completion of most of the game's available content. While the time-consuming mastery these achievements demand is fairly standard in AAA games' trophy lists, *Red Dead Redemption 2* does feature some trophies that are more thoughtfully designed and considerate towards encouraging roleplay.

Trophies with potential to facilitate roleplaying and the "radical slowness" of *Red Dead Redemption 2's* design are those that provide specific excuses for living in the game's world fulsomely rather than moving efficiently between main objectives or enduring extensively to exhaust every bit of the game's content.[57] These include trophies like "Breaking and Entering," which asks the player to rob 4/7 of the game's homesteads and thereby indulge in Arthur's role as an outlaw. "Give to the Poor" asks the player to donate $250 to the Van der Linde gang he is part of, similarly encouraging more roleplaying to immerse oneself in his daily life. "Friends with Benefits" is unlocked by completing one Companion Activity—a random chance to spend more time with one of Arthur's fellow gang members—in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 in which there are 3-4 opportunities each. "Western Stranger" asks the player to complete 10/31 of the game's Stranger Missions, which tell the story of a random inhabitant in the game world Arthur can involve himself with. What these trophies have in common is that they all demand substantial engagement in one aspect of *Red Dead Redemption 2's* wide range of content, yet the requirements fall well short of exhausting all the associated content. As Stein indicates, "a well designed trophy list can clearly indicate a set of intentions for play, pointing players in the direction of a particular 'metaexperience' that may in fact add to the base experience of play."[58] In this respect, one can see how the developers might have designed this set of trophies (among others) around a thorough yet not exhaustive experience they are suggesting players have with the game.

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[57] Ibid.
[58] Eric Stein, "It Can't Be for Nothing: Communicating Intentions for Play through Trophy Design in the Last of Us and the Last of Us Part II," *TWU Research and Creativity Symposium* (2020) 5.

Although developers can use achievements to encourage player behaviors that may open them towards a mindset for roleplaying, *Undertale* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* achieve this first and foremost through their semantically involving narrative design. *Red Dead Redemption 2* is an uncommon work of triple-A game design that "leaves players alone" to "pursue contemplation over action, engage in process over product, value idleness over efficiency, revel in stillness over speed and cherish potential waste over economization."[59] *Red Dead Redemption 2* encourages the player to take their time with the game and revel in its meticulously constructed world. It incorporates a number of mechanics, such as eating food (to replenish health), making coffee (to replenish stamina), and camping out that the player could easily avoid if they are simply trying to reach the end of the game. Yet the game provides these affordances to the player as a sandbox for roleplaying—for feeling the reality behind the virtual experience. At the same time, roleplaying is always a metagame the player can opt into if a videogame world and/or its characters captivate them. Ruberg discusses the practice of leisurely, slow play—even in mainstream games that do not encourage it—as a defiance of the hegemonic logics that define the normative player subject and gameplay experience.[60] With the pervasiveness of networked achievement systems, the game industry rhetorically presents gameful engagement as the norm. Perhaps non-coincidentally, this norm encourages players to consume more games for longer periods of time. Through unconventional narrative design that subverts their respective genres, both *Undertale* and *Red*

[59] Vanderhoef and Payne, "Press X to Wait."
[60] Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, 201.

Dead Redemption 2 want players to derive meaning from gameplay experiences unfettered by a series of clearly flagged goals meant to optimize flow, fun, and mastery. If players are left alone to experience the videogame as a holistic whole, perhaps they will be motivated to discover their own meaning. This is the essence of roleplaying.

2.4.5 Conclusion

While achievement systems can indeed gamify gameplay and their pursuit may impede a videogame's intended aesthetic or thematic experience, developers can also use them to highlight a recommended balance between efficient play and completionism that can facilitate roleplaying. Despite this potential, a significant issue remains: their overarching nature as extra-diegetic, socially integrated reward systems. The very design of the trophy system privileges gameful engagement above all else by the focus on trophies earned and, most significantly to the community, the completion-dependent Platinum trophies. While players have the agency to determine their own use of these systems, the capitalist and masculinist rhetoric in its design encourages players to function as ideal consumers. Like any gamified system, it serves to sustain user engagement with a product beyond what they might otherwise invest in it while collecting data on user behaviors. This is not to say that earning achievements cannot be fun or meaningful. I have often been unable to resist the dopamine hit of seeing a trophy notification pop up on the screen after performing something impressive or exhausting some portion of a game's content. My point is to call attention to the ways that trophies privilege (and therefore encourage) certain types of playstyles over

others—in this case, an appeal to the ludic immersion of gaming versus the semantic meaning roleplaying can open one to.

While not every game is built to offer a robust roleplaying experience, and roleplay is often not something a videogame system requires for progression, the imaginative engagement of roleplaying is always available to the player should they feel compelled to immerse themselves in the narrative experience a game offers. A videogame can also facilitate roleplaying through systems and mechanics such as dialogue trees, character building, or even the simple affordance to deliberately walk rather than run. Even so, digital games have much tighter constraints in their design than analogue games like TTRPGs that depend on players outwardly performing *as if* they are their character to co-create the game's content and structure.[61] Further research on this topic that was outside the scope of this study might analyze the design intentions of a specific trophy alongside its completion statistics as reflected on the PSNProfiles website. Perhaps it may even be helpful to create a typology of trophies divided into whether they facilitate gameful, playful, roleplay or other types of engagement to better understand the ways they shape player behavior.

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[61] Bowman, *The Functions of Role-playing Games*, 30.

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Chapter 3
Narrative Design as Text and Process

3.1 Interstitial Chapter: Segue to Section 3

Section 2's three peer-reviewed papers further developed the focus on narrative aesthetics in digital games from Section 1 through a theoretical, formal, and experiential focus on the concept of roleplaying in a single-player context. I examined similarities and differences between this form of roleplaying and the concept's rich history in analogue role-playing game (RPG) scholarship, incorporated case studies that explore the creative practice of roleplaying and its potential for player reflection, and delved into some of the history of how digital RPGs from both Japanese and Western developers established the formal conventions for single-player roleplaying. I also contrast roleplaying with the culturally standardized practice of gaming, which prioritizes a game's ludic pleasures over its narrative ones. Understood as a creative practice players can opt into, roleplaying is not an essential part of playing or enjoying a game. However, it can enrich a player's experience of a game's narrative by actively cultivating one's sense of immersion in a game world and character role using the formal affordances and fixed story elements a game presents. The next section will build upon the previous ones by offering a fresh theoretical understanding of *narrative design* by considering how a game's formal affordances, story elements, and other multimodal elements cohere from the perspective of developers and players alike.

Section 3 will explore the textual and material contexts of how narrative design is created by developers and interpreted by players. This section will build on the theoretical framework from the first two sections by looking to the industry and videogame history to

explore how narrative meaning gets embedded and interpreted from top-down (developer) and bottom-up (player) perspectives. Ultimately, neither developer nor player have authorial control over the meaning of a game's narrative, which comes about in the meeting and co-determination of these two creative forces. Narrative design is the final key term for this dissertation's discussion of videogame narrative. In a practical development context, part of a narrative designer's job "is to maximize player immersion within the game play experience" (Game Developer). As discussed in Section 2, in an RPG (broadly defined) this sense of immersion is tied to the way the game facilitates roleplaying though its affordances and storytelling. Since I have already discussed the rhetorical basis of videogame narrative (via immersion) and the player's experience of it (via roleplaying), the final area for this project is to examine the material contexts of its creation and reception (via narrative design).

There is a lack of direct theoretical engagement with the term *narrative design* in game studies, so I turn to books by professional narrative designers as the basis for my definition. I cite texts by professional narrative designers such as Breault and Berger to inform my understanding of the individual and collaborative work it entails, but their writing tackles this work from a highly pragmatic perspective as they are meant as guides for aspiring narrative designers entering the industry with commercial success in mind. Although they offer useful insights in that context, it also results in a reductive view of what narrative design can creatively aspire towards. Breault and Berger promote a consumer-friendly approach in which narrative design serves to achieve "optimum entertainment value" (Berger 21) for players and that story "never gets in the way of players' enjoyment of the game" (Breault 18). It is here that I want to push back, if only slightly. This is not to insist that

narrative designers should actively work against the commercial viability of the games they work on, but that a textual understanding of narrative design must look past intent and the ultimate telos of 'fun' to account for the role of player experience and productive frictions in the cultivation of meaning.

With narrative design, I am particularly interested in how meanings and themes are incorporated into a larger game design by developers, which are then encountered and interpreted by players during gameplay. When I refer to narrative design, I am thus not referring exclusively to the creative vision of a certain individual or team—for that vision is inevitably compromised and re-molded throughout the game development process. Narrative design is encountered as the end result of the creative processes of game development, including the alterations needed to appease other priorities on the team and the way the *game itself* is filtered through the experience of an individual player. A narrative designer is a role in many development teams, but it is a collaborative role concerned with maintaining a thematic consistency across a videogame's multiple media elements—such as game mechanics, sound design, and art direction. While a narrative designer often has creative authority in conceiving the coherency of a game's many elements—or at least in how they implement the vision of a creative director—this vision is subject to material forces such as interpersonal dynamics with team members, the skills and work of those members, production time, overall project priorities, etc. (Breault 6). Narrative design is thus a text without a stable author. To unpack this idea, part of Section 3 engages with case studies of development processes from different teams and explore the creative impacts of work from individual developers across roles on their respective teams.

Perhaps the primary reason early ludologists opposed the application of narrative theory to videogames is due to the structural difference between stories and games/simulations (Frasca, Eskelinen). This goes beyond the realm of videogames, as digital media theorists like Lev Manovich describe how the computer age has brought on a new form of cultural expression, the *database*, that is supplanting the previous predominant form of *narrative* and thus represents a new way of understanding the world: "As a cultural form, database represents the world as a list of items which it refuses to order. In contrast, a narrative creates a cause-and effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events)" (85). Yet, this shift in organizational structure does not mean that we will no longer decipher meaning in the form of narrative. On social media, for instance, we see how global discourse is expressed through a chaotic presentation of posts that may or may not be responding to one another. Click on an individual profile, though, and we can see how users organize the events of their lives as a linear trajectory that presents a story of oneself. Beth Coleman conceives of such profiles as avatars in the same vein as a videogame avatar—a digital being conveying a manufactured identity that both is and is not the user's self (110). Our brains can easily turn a nonlinear database of raw content into a narrative by interpreting it as such and imaginatively filling in apparent gaps, just as readers must fill in narrative gaps within a literary work (*Act of Reading* 182).

Our engagement with videogames on a narrative level occurs in much the same way. Tracing the materiality of a videogame to its code, we can see a pure database of figures, values and text strings that stand on their own. A videogame's code is "a sequential list of separated elements" which becomes formally represented through a game engine with assets

and imparted with a sense of linear progression and narrative meaning through play (Manovich 85). Narrative design guides and attempts to frame the database of media elements created for a game's development through a thematic vision. Berger notes that "the golden path [i.e. main story of a videogame] is based on a logical sequence of events that, by their very nature, are narrative in spirit… the narrative designer's value in the co-design of the golden path is providing the logic, context, and escalating dramatic action that furthers a player's progress" (21) For this reason, "structure is the most critical part of game narrative" because it reframes a fragmented database of assets and mechanics into a coherent, linearly perceived experience (Berger 22). Similar to the way that the non-linear database of the internet (as a whole) becomes a more linear narrative in the context of a user's browsing history, it is important to distinguish a videogame object (as non-linear text) and someone's playthrough of a videogame (as linear experience).

I explore this dual definition of narrative design throughout Section 3's subsections and peer-reviewed papers. The section brings together content expanded from conference papers and peer-reviewed work, covering topics ranging from game analysis, videogame textuality, videogame development and questions of authorship, reflections on a research-creation project synthesizing discursive design and narrative design, and interdisciplinary research combining methods and knowledge from Computer Science and the Humanities in relation to these topics and the broader theme of narrative design. The first subsection, "Interpreting Gameplay Experience through Narrative Design," is developed out of a conference paper for the Canadian Game Studies Association (CGSA) conference in 2023. The second subsection, "Sustaining Videogame Authorship: Approaches for Developer-

Centric Analysis," is developed out of a conference paper for CGSA 2024. This is followed by the first peer-reviewed paper, "Incorporating Discursive Design in Critical Play: On the Making of *Prometheus: A Discourse Reflection Game for Engineers*," which was accepted to *IEEE ETHICS-2023* and for publication in the conference proceedings on *IEEE Xplore*.[62] The section concludes with a paper I co-authored with Dr. Cristiano Politowski from Ontario Tech University and submitted to *Games: Research and Practice* for peer review, "Iterating Identity: Mixed-Methods Analysis of the Creative Process Developing *Dragon Quest I-VI*."

Section 3's introduction begins by elaborating on the conceptual distinction between game design and narrative design. Here, I conceive of narrative design as a useful term for grasping the multimodal expressiveness of videogames, the collaborative coauthoring process that necessitates, and how it informs the overall narrative experience players have with them. Although game design and narrative design practices ideally support each other, a look at two polarizing critical reviews of Upper One Games' *Never Alone* reveals how a player's appreciation of either the functionality of a game's design versus the expressiveness of its narrative design can override issues with the other in a holistic assessment of the play experience. The introduction also further expands on the connection between narrative design, immersion, and roleplaying that frames the key terms' interconnectivity in understanding the aesthetics of videogame narrative.

[62] I unfortunately was not able to attend *ETHICS-2023* due to scheduling and financial reasons. As a result, the paper was never published.

The first subsection, “Interpreting Gameplay Experience through Narrative Design,” builds directly on the introduction’s definition by pushing for a textual understanding of narrative design based on the practical work of narrative designers, game studies scholarship on videogame ontology, and traditional narrative theory that can be used to understand the ways that players/critics have and can continue to interpret their gameplay experience as text. The ‘object’ of gameplay can be understood as the dynamic, real-time presentation of what takes place on-screen as a game is played. Gameplay is thus always informed by the subjective interactions and decision-making of an individual player, yet exists independently of them. On the other hand, the narrative meaning of gameplay cannot be divorced from its player. Players are co-authors in that they actively construct a narrative of gameplay both materially (in the actual manifestation of the game as played—or *playthrough*) and mentally (by generating an interpretation of virtual experience through immersed play and reflection). As a performative event, gameplay is fundamentally an embodied textual creation informed by the player’s engagement with the design of the game. I draw on both Kieron Gillen’s original conception of New Games Journalism and contemporary feminist game studies scholarship to stress the functional and political importance of centralizing the player’s subjectivity in the interpretation of narrative design. Finally, I draw on the four categories from Consalvo and Dutton’s formalist “Game Analysis” methodology and update it using terminology from game development and more widely used scholarly terms in order to broaden its accessibility to non-academics.

While the previous section builds upon my textual understanding of narrative design from the perspective of player experience and interpretation, the next discusses the material

processes around how game developers must collaborate to embed this multimodal significance in the game. This subsection, "Sustaining Videogame Authorship: Approaches for Developer-Centric Analysis," proposes a methodological intervention into game studies that advocates for the value of videogame researchers to connect aspects of the games they are analyzing with the individual developers credited for its creation. The purpose of this approach is for scholars and critics to cultivate a more nuanced understanding of how the games they analyze are made and the individual creators whose creativity and labour is often subsumed by a depersonalized company name or the work of a game's creative lead—presenting a corporatized manifestation of Foucault's author function. To work towards amending this neglect, the section considers the value of this research process through reflections on the author function and film's auteur theory, runs through existing resources (such as Mobygames) for tracking and understanding the creative labour of developers as individuals and teams, and applies this theory and method towards a case study of Nintendo employee Yoshiaki Koizumi's early career. The research process unveils how the text of narrative design, as described in the previous section, must account for the material processes of game development and not just the vision of a narrative designer or game director. This will help articulate the messy process and textuality of narrative design and address existing assumptions surrounding authorship in media more broadly (Foucault; Barthes; Sarris) and videogame authorship in particular (Whitson; Cho et al.; Švelch).

These first two subsections set up the discussions about the process of game development taken up in the following papers. The first peer-reviewed paper, "Incorporating Discursive Design in Critical Play: On the Making of *Prometheus: A Discourse Reflection*

Game for Engineers," reflects on my own process working as a narrative designer. I discuss my development process of a Twine game I created with the intent to prompt ethical reflection for engineering students and professionals through roleplaying. The paper covers the game's subject matter, its intention as a critical tool, and the incorporation of discursive design (B. Tharp and S. Tharp), narrative design (Berger), and critical play (Flanagan) principles into the development process. The purpose of the game is to promote a novel interactive approach to education in tech ethics. In addition, the reflections in the paper are meant to provide a framework for other game developers to synthesize the immersive entertainment of game/narrative design with discursive design's critical intent. Through this, I explore how the techniques of narrative design stretch beyond entertainment value to support the subversive expressions of discursive design.

In the final paper, I move away from my own experience to analyze the game design and narrative design evolutions of *Dragon Quest*, a pioneering RPG series. The second peer-reviewed paper, "Iterating Identity: Mixed-Methods Analysis of the Creative Process Developing *Dragon Quest I-VI,*" synthesizes the discussions of player interpretation, videogame co-authorship, and the creative design process through an interdisciplinary lens. I do this by applying data regarding hardware limitations and software asset development and reuse towards a mixed-methods analysis of *Dragon Quest I-VI*. Our findings demonstrate that while *Dragon Quest I-III* solidified the game design foundation the series is still known for, *Dragon Quest IV-VI* showcase a pivot in creative focus towards expressive narrative design. This creative turn thus marks a decisive moment in the maturity of digital RPGs as a storytelling genre, which we explore in parallel with the technological evolution of two

console generations between the mid-1980s to mid-1990s. The analysis highlights new elements and structural changes with each game to consider whether and how the developers took advantage of advanced technology to offer new gameplay and narrative experiences within an otherwise fixed game design. The project also demonstrates how collaborations between Computer Science and Humanities research methods can reveal greater insights into the material factors that inform the creation, significance, and interpretation of videogames as both technical and artistic textual objects.

Across this material, Section 3 contributes to this dissertation's overarching goal of addressing and better understanding the unique material conditions, aesthetics, and history of videogame narrative. The key terms of immersion, roleplaying, and narrative design are interconnected materially and rhetorically in the ways videogames have been and continue to be conceived and consumed as storytelling media. My intent in this integrated thesis and the research dissemination efforts I have undertaken throughout my PhD has been to use these terms as a jumping off point for better understanding what makes videogames a unique and compelling medium for fictional narratives. While the terms are interconnected, I have come to see narrative design as the most significant for bridging these discourses. My case studies in all three sections can be understood as attempts to wrestle meaning from virtual experiences through the textual framework I develop for narrative design. The pursuit to interpret videogames and the narrative experiences they offer as meaningful—through immersing oneself in their worlds and roleplaying a subject within those worlds—comes down to narrative design's multimodal scope and the productive (if not always frictionless) interaction between a player's identity and desires and the fixed formal and rhetorical

elements of a game. To interpret narrative design is to find meaning in the meeting between two creative forces: the developers' creation of a game's systems and representations and the player's actualization of this material as a narrative text through gameplay.

3.2 Introduction

While the previous sections of this dissertation have been primarily concerned with player experience and the role of the player in co-creating game narrative, Section 3 factors in the creative labour that developers put into the product before it reaches its players. To fully understand the player's creative role in actualizing game narrative as such, we must first consider the materials they are given to work with: the raw, multimodal materials of narrative design before it is activated and actualized as a text during gameplay. If game design is the art of conceptualizing a game's affordances and progression (what actions the player can take, how to progress the game, how it feels to play), then narrative design is the consideration of how these factors are contextualized to influence the meaning of the game. With videogames, what becomes narratively meaningful—in the sense of stemming from an aspect of narrative design—is an extra feature that expands the game's capacity for meaning. I will begin Section 3 by defining narrative design before discussing its extraneousness to videogames' function while advocating for its importance to videogames' maturity as artistic objects. Games with considered narrative design may not necessarily *play* differently, but they tend to contextualize that play experience in a way that enriches its potential for meaning.

A videogame does not *require* a carefully considered narrative design to work as a videogame and, in fact, much of the game development process abstracts game design from its representational, narrative elements. The use of gray boxes in game development is a good example to distinguish game design from narrative design. Sometimes called white boxes or black boxes, gray boxes are "self-contained spaces where all the 3-D models [look] monochromatic and ugly because there [is] no proper art attached," and are used by developers to test out design ideas and see which ones feel good to play (Schreier 47). In a gray box, design principles are already complete and ready for testing, but there is no mimetic or semiotic significance to any action committed there. Gray boxes represent game design distilled to its essence as a set of systems, mechanics, and play spaces primed for interactive entertainment. Narrative design—and all the members of the development team involved in materially realizing its vision—involves the work of dressing these abstracted spaces into something the player can attach meaning to.

Early ludology research shows what is lost in discussions of videogame ontology and textuality if narrative design is dismissed as superfluous to the medium. We see this in Espen Aarseth's comment that, when he looks at *Tomb Raider* (1996) protagonist Lara Croft while playing as her, "I don't even see her body, but see through it and past it" (48). As an early ludologist, Aarseth's comment is meant to downplay the significance of representation in videogames, including a figure as tailored for the male gaze as the PSX model of Lara Croft with her disproportionately large polygonal breasts. Aarseth promotes a supposedly mature perspective on videogames that sees them first and foremost as gray boxes for the play of mechanics, rather than culturally significant media that can hold socially relevant meanings

(MacCallum-Stewart). Lara Croft's original design has been problematized because she was conceived as a sexualized female figure for a videogame clearly aimed at young male audiences, which is explicitly apparent in *Tomb Raider's* marketing (Vossen 13-14). In comparison, the 2013 reboot of *Tomb Raider* features a richer narrative design that depicts Lara with a realistic body type, humanizes her more fully with a detailed backstory, and incorporates survival and RPG systems that add immersive depth to the player's experience embodying her. While it feels like an obvious point, what made the 2013 *Tomb Raider* an acclaimed and successful reboot was that it thoughtfully developed its narrative design around its once unabashedly sexualized protagonist—a depiction enabled by the idea that her body is merely a game object to look at and through.

While the *Tomb Raider* reboot does not fully amend the male gaze around Lara Croft's character, her discursive transformation from explicitly sexualized game object to a more humanized character is one way that thoughtful implementation of narrative design can have feminist impacts in the mainstream game industry. Important feminist work can manifest through iteration that "*plays into* a structural paradigm yet pushes at the boundaries of that structure," such as by "creating powerful opportunities for players to experiment with identity and agency" (Chess 40). Following Chess' framework of *playful feminism*, indie games like *Never Alone* and *Raji: An Ancient Epic* are feminist in that they take established, popularly acclaimed design conventions and apply them to ideas that help combat what Vossen calls the "cultural inaccessibility" of videogames, referring to "the various cultural barriers that either deliberately or unconsciously exclude people from certain subcultures" (15). *Never Alone* (*Kisima Inŋitchuŋa*) is a 2D puzzle-platformer whose game design is

inspired by the successful indie hit, *Limbo*, yet it builds upon that foundation by incorporating Iñupiaq themes across its main story, co-op mechanics, level design, and enemy encounters. Similarly, *Raji: An Ancient Epic* adapts the core gameplay of the hypermasculine ancient Greek 3D action in the AAA blockbuster *God of War* (2005) albeit with a focus on Hindu mythology and storytelling. Both games borrow liberally from their established genre inspirations in terms of fundamental game design, yet their narrative design breaks new ground in the medium through the authentic implementation of underrepresented cultures that give each game a unique flavour and identity.

When discussing the development of *Never Alone*, Lead Cultural Advisor, Amy Fredeen, uses the term "world games" to refer to games that consult with local communities in the interest of authentic inclusivity when basing a game around a specific culture (qtd. in IGN). A "world game" is not a genre in the sense of conventional systems and mechanics, but in how the perceived cohesion of a game's representational elements—its narrative design—lend an authentic picture into a culture's values. This serves as a strong example of Flanagan and Nissenbaum's *Values at Play* design model, where developers acknowledge the ways that digital artifacts embed cultural and political values in their design and take steps in the development process to ensure that the resulting game reflects these value intentions (11). For instance, collectables tend to be a key mechanic of platformers that incentivize exploration. In order to infuse this mechanic with values, *Never Alone's* collectables unlock "cultural insights"—short documentary videos where Iñupiaq consultants on the team explain how the content in that level adapts specific aspects of Iñupiaq culture. The consideration of

how game systems/mechanics, goals, and aesthetics can convey consistent values to players is a key aspect of narrative design.

It is worth noting some of the divisiveness in *Never Alone's* critical reception, as game reviewers are split between a strong appreciation of the game's thematic ambition and the freshness of its specific cultural basis, while others focus on faulting the game for mechanical clunkiness in comparison to other puzzle-platformers. For instance, Daniel Starkey from *Eurogamer* gave the game a perfect 10/10 score, writing through his positionality as an "American Indian" and noting its deeply personal impact: "Instead of eliciting self-pity, it stands in absolute defiance of everything that I've grown to be, not only telling me to be better, but showing me how." In contrast, Daniel Hindes from *Gamespot* gave the game a poor 4/10 score, noting that his appreciation of the game's cultural sincerity does not offset problems such as "sluggish, unresponsive controls" and "vague visual language [that] makes key mechanics unclear." The two reviews serve as great examples of how game design and narrative design can be conceptually separated. While the meaning Starkey found from his gameplay experience stemmed from its narrative design, making the game as a whole "[feel and look] just as it should," Hindes' frustration with the game's ludic elements was enough to spoil it as a whole. The contrast reveals how players can approach the same game with drastically different priorities, and how much of the deeper meaning games can offer come down to one's identity and values.

Game design, when seen in a vacuum, primarily serves *hedonic* motivations (e.g. positive emotions from seeking pleasure and comfort) while narrative design extends a videogame's appeal to *eudaimonic* motivations, which "encompass components such as striving for

authenticity (i.e. who one truly is), meaning (i.e. serving a higher purpose)… and personal growth" (Possler et al. 3). Social psychology research on videogames identifies three types of eudaimonic experiences:

1. **meaningful experiences**, where players make connections between in-game elements and out-of-game meaningful elements from their personal lives
2. **emotionally moving and challenging experiences**, where players struggle with complex and intense emotional in-game elements
3. and **self-reflective experiences**, where players contemplate and try to understand themselves based on in-game elements (Bowman et al. 1)

Furthermore, "eudaimonic experiences are generally observed as resulting from situations that fall outside of the usual patterns of play" (Bowman et al. 3) and its emotional response "can be associated with internal feeling states or external elicitors (such as music and other forms of media)" (Daneels et al. 180). Starkey's review of *Never Alone* contains language touching on all these aspects of eudaimonic fulfillment, while Hindes' critique focuses on his lack of hedonic pleasure from the game. As I have been discussing, narrative design can be felt most tangibly in the ways that a game's design and storytelling break from convention, as well as through the thematic integration of its media elements.

In Section 1, I defined immersion as a narrative-based phenomenon against ludic-centric definitions of a similarly used word, flow. Interesting narrative design need not pull players along in a perpetual flow-like state. In fact, it can entail the use of game elements to demand engagement by introducing friction in the gameplay experience. For example, the

videogame *Drakengard* (Cavia, 2003) uses mechanics from the *musou* genre. The most popular *musou* series, *Dynasty Warriors*, has players control military leaders from the Three Kingdoms period of Chinese history and slice through hundreds of enemy soldiers across clumped battlefields with ease. While featuring a historically compelling premise, the *Dynasty Warriors* games mainly excel at facilitating flow with its frictionless dispatching of enemy hordes. *Drakengard* complicates this hedonic-oriented design by making its protagonist, Caim, an anti-hero filled with an unrelenting hatred for his kingdom's opposition. Caim ends up forming a soul-bonding pact with a dragon who has a similar contempt of human life, and the player kills hordes of enemies through armed combat and by burning them while riding the dragon. The game's dialogue during this action portrays Caim as a morally questionable figure, cutscenes are shot from a dissociative aerial view, and the music that plays during levels is filled with harsh and dissonant strings. This makes gameplay feel cruel and monotonous which, in comparison to *Dynasty Warriors*, offers a more complex *affective rhetoric*: "the language of the feeling [games] invoke, how they communicate emotions to their players, how designing affect is interwoven in the art of game design" (Ruberg 165). *Drakengard* re-contextualizes the core mechanics of *Dynasty Warriors* to instill negative emotions in players that disrupt flow and prompt the sort of reflection and interpretation that flow tends to obstruct (Soderman 31). This subversive affect plays a central role in the way that *Drakengard* works as a unique narrative experience. It transmutes the player's hedonic motivations—that may have prompted them to play the game in the first place—into a more eudaimonic orientation. This is the most significant way that

commercial videogames, through narrative design, can make long-lasting impressions on their players and not just offer transient pleasure.

The creative work involved with narrative design is what establishes the grounds for and encourages narrative-driven engagement from players, such as a player's sense of immersion in the fictional world (as discussed in Section 1) and desire to roleplay their avatar (as discussed in Section 2). Immersion is both a corporate buzzword and a longstanding way of describing what makes the digital worlds of videogames compelling. Immersion's deep-rooted discursive connection to videogame narrative can even be observed in job postings for narrative designers. A posting from Monolith states that the narrative designer will "be relied upon to collaborate with other designers to assist in design and implementation of game world systems and mission/quest design… to maximize player immersion within the game play experience" (qtd. in Game Developer). Another, for Microsoft, similarly notes how their responsibility "is to champion story, craft compelling narrative elements, and… maximize player immersion within the game play experience" (qtd. in Game Developer). Immersion is often used by corporations like Sony and Microsoft to promote the necessity of purchasing new console hardware capable of higher graphical fidelity (Sinclair, Goldfarb), but in these job postings we see how developers understand immersion as a fundamental part of the *narrative* experience games offer. So, despite the graphics and hardware-based conception of immersion used in videogame marketing that I discussed in Section 1, developers on the other hand link it to design and storytelling. With that said, establishing a videogame's narrative design goes beyond the work of designers and writers.

Importantly, a narrative designer is a collaborator who by working across development departments from lead designers, writers, voice directors, art directors, etc. tries to make all these multimodal elements of a videogame feel thematically coherent. Professional narrative designer Ross Berger notes that "in games, the theme is a result of the creative vision. The story, therefore, must reinforce that theme through subtle means, such as: escalation in the story beats; visual reinforcement through environmental storytelling; context descriptions before missions" and the support of art, animation, audio and other departments (Berger 25-26). What's interesting for thematic expression in the context of narrative design is not the 'what' as much as the 'how': how is this theme reinforced through the game's presentation, gameplay loop, interactions, and overall sense of progression? In a Russian Formalist sense, it is not a videogame's *story/fabula* that makes players feel immersed, but how the other elements of the game thematically support the *narrative experience/sjuzhet* (Tomashevsky 68). Although the official position of narrative designer did not begin to appear in videogame credits until 2006, this certainly does not mean that what we now understand as narrative design did not inform many story-driven games' development before then (Game Developer). More than realistic physics, believable writing, or visual fidelity, immersion depends on the internal consistency of the game world across all these elements. As long as a game feels internally consistent through its multimodal language and otherwise grabs the attention of the player during gameplay, they will be motivated to actively participate in their sense of immersion. This is, theoretically and practically speaking, the goal of narrative design.

Similar to immersion, interactivity is another word that has been extensively critiqued and deconstructed by game studies scholars. Once seen as a fundamental marker of what can make videogame narratives unique, it has been unpacked as an exaggerated and idealized myth misleadingly emphasizing this supposed uniqueness (Newman, Stang, "This Action"). Yet, like immersion, it informs the way game developers, including narrative designers, approach their work. Michael Breault describes the work of a narrative designer as fundamentally different from that of a writer working with linear media due to the non-linear nature of its interactions (3). Therefore, a good narrative designer possesses a different skillset and approach to narrative ideation than a novelist or a screenwriter. He argues that interactivity is a suitable word for capturing this, as the key difference for creating a videogame story is that it must be actualized by the player through action. While deconstructive criticisms of interactivity have allowed for some interesting observations regarding the extent to which games truly allow agency, it is a pedantic fixation in the context of how videogame developers understand and execute their work. Narrative designers may or may not write the text that appears in-game (depending on the size of the team), but their primary task is the creation of narrative systems: the underlying triggering criteria for a story mechanism (Berger 24). This mechanism is activated by players during gameplay, which generates the game's narrative. In the context of gameplay, then, interactivity pertains to both the player's mental efforts to interpret their experience narratively and functionally—not unlike how reader response theorists understand a reader's interaction with a novel—and their literal, material construction of the text that is gameplay.

This simultaneous mental and physical creative work—structured through narrative design—is part of how I defined roleplaying in Section 2.

Section 3 continues these ideas while addressing the complex and varied nature of game development. I invoke narrative design as a unifying term that helps conceive of the process and product of game development and textual interpretation from a new lens. The first part of this section expands on this textual understanding of narrative design through a grounding in narrative theory and the professional practice of narrative designers. Afterwards, I create a methodology for how players can interpret narrative design by synthesizing ideas from reader-response theory, game journalism, and game studies formalism. I then pivot to a discussion on videogame authorship focused on how players and scholars can use resources available online to investigate and extrapolate the messy process of videogame development and the creative labour involved in making a game's multimodal elements cohere. This leads into a paper that covers and reflects on my own efforts creating a Twine game, *Prometheus*, and the process of working as a narrative designer attempting to convey values in its story-focused gameplay experience. I conclude with a paper that uses a collaborative, mixed-methods approach from the humanities and computer science to conduct an analysis on the evolution of the *Dragon Quest* series' game design and narrative design in the context of its historical significance and the influence of the hardware it was developed for on the developer's creative process.

3.3 Interpreting Gameplay Experience through Narrative Design

3.3.1 Defining Narrative Design

Narrative design is a term used in games discourse that pertains not only to a game's plot or its storytelling, but to the coherent integration of a game's systems, mechanics and other representational elements with its narrative themes (Berger 26). However, the term is usually discussed from the standpoint of the intentions of a narrative designer and has yet to be thoroughly unpacked in the academic field of game studies. Here, I present narrative design as a useful term for understanding the player's interpretation of a game's design as integrated with its narrative themes. I aim to advance a *textual* understanding of narrative design as it derives from multiple aspects of game development and becomes inevitably intertwined with the player's subjectivity and individual encounter with the game. Can a player's understanding of the formal and rhetorical elements of digital games allow for a type of analysis that facilitates self-reflection? Because every playthrough of a game is itself the production of a singular text, narrative design becomes shaped by the personal background and subjective desires of the individual player. Here, I synthesize professional accounts of narrative design work and ideas from reader-response theory and feminist game studies with the tenants of New Games Journalism. My intent is to continue the work of advocating for public-facing writing on games (from academics and non-academics alike) through the lens of understanding how narrative design is encountered and interpreted by players.

To help develop a more thorough understanding of narrative design as a term, I want to first look at how it is understood in the context of game development. Professional narrative designer Mike Breault notes that what separates a narrative designer from a

videogame writer is their embeddedness in the entire design process. Put simply, "A narrative designer has tremendous influence on the game's story and how it meshes with gameplay to deliver the intended player experience" (Breault 1). As a practice, narrative design gets lumped into three separate tasks: writing, design, and collaboration (Breault 2). Like most game development, it is highly iterative. A narrative designer will often have to revise a game's writing and design due to the necessities of collaboration. They write the game design document in the early stages of development to consolidate the goals of the different teams, and then move to scripting character interaction and storytelling during the development phase.

Breault describes the work of a narrative designer as fundamentally different from that of a writer working with media such as books and movies due to the non-linear nature of interactivity. Game studies scholars have long been debating the supposed "myth" of interactivity (Newman, Stang, "This Action"), yet Breault's experience demonstrates that the nature of the videogame medium does indeed call for unique approaches to storytelling and conveying narrative meaning. The work of narrative design is also unique due to videogames' multimodality. Narrative designers must speak with the game's artists about how their character creations match up with the narrative designer's formative description, or discuss how a game's music or sound effects support the particular mood or theme of a scene (Breault 6). This demonstrates the degree to which game narrative can be expressed through all its media elements, and how the resulting work can never be traced to only a single individual. Even when we, as scholars or critics, try focusing our object of study to a game's story or design, it still cannot be traced to a stable authorial voice. It is the result of

collaborations and compromises that shape the entirety of the gameplay experience and whatever narrative meaning is expressed as a result. If we could call narrative design a 'text,' it is a chaotic text made up of different voices, labour, and tensions which together churn out a collaborative effort which may or may not adhere to a game director or narrative designer's original 'vision.' Narrative design is fundamentally iterative and adaptive to account for the multimodal labour and inevitable compromises of the game development process.

These material factors that comprise a narrative designer's work should not be ignored in considering a player's reception of the 'product' of narrative design—that is, how the design, story, and multimodal elements form a coherent whole. Breault presents a commonly used definition of game design as "*the art of crafting the player experience,*" noting that "[o]nce you define that experience, every aspect of your game design should work toward delivering it" (9). Story, systems, and all other gameplay and media elements incorporated into the game ideally serve as holistically integrated materials for the player to perceive as meaningful. When it comes to interpreting narrative design, then, a player analyzing their play experience of a game *as narrative* is the most common way of accessing the text. If game design, and by extension narrative design, can be best understood as a procedural structure from which player experience takes shape and meaningfully develops, then the player must interpret narrative design based on their own encounter with it. This encounter is the 'product' of narrative design. Just as a videogame is functionally and ontologically an "action," as Alexander Galloway declared, videogame narrative is a realization of narrative design produced through said action (2).

3.3.2 The Textuality of Gameplay

Interpretation has long been regarded as a form of interaction between a text and its reader in phenomenology and reader-response theory. Although interactivity is a term that has been applied at length to computer use and digital games due to their procedural and participatory properties (Murray 88), interaction also has significant connotations with purely mental activity. Reader-response theorists, a group of literary scholars in the late 20th century interested in deconstructing textual interpretation, described the process of reading as interaction. Wolfgang Iser's phenomenology of the aesthetic experience of reading describes the reader as a figure with agency in the construction of textual meaning when interacting with a work of literature. Iser is interested in art's connection to truth, which he believes is neither wholly subjective nor objective, but a result of the process of interaction between a text and reader; yet his approach is functional rather than ontological. He focuses on what literature *does* (its "aesthetic effect") rather than what it *means* (its reception as an object) (*Act of Reading* 21). Iser's theory of the interaction between text and reader demonstrates how a subjective self is formed and structured within the formal and discursive bounds of a fictional text during the experience of reading. This meeting of two worlds, of the reader subject mixed into the object text, provides an experience of temporary self-alienation and becoming through the active process of reading: "it is the elements of indeterminacy that enable the text to 'communicate' with the reader, in the sense that they induce [them] to participate both in the production and the comprehension of the work's intention" (Iser, *Act of Reading* 24).

The text itself then, conceived as a product of this interaction rather than a fixed object complete unto itself, is objective insofar as it provides the reader a formal *repertoire* (set of instructions composed of discourse and form) of thematic and fictional perspectives and structures, and subjective in how the reader assembles connections between the *blanks* (narrative and thematic vacancies) that the text leaves them to imaginatively project into. Each act of reading is thus a "performance of meaning" that produces the *virtual text*: a unique manifestation of meaning emerging from the discursive synthesis of formal features and an individual's predispositions and tendencies in drawing connections between those features (*Act of Reading* 24). Iser defines a text as a structure of effects set in motion through the act of reading (*Act of Reading* 21). What makes a videogame unique from a book or film, however, is that this structure is never able to present itself as such. The textual structure of a game is blackboxed from its players. On one hand, this is the result of developers being highly protective of their intellectual properties; on the other hand, it highlights the primarily subjective, experiential nature of a videogame's textuality as encountered by players.

The fact that gameplay is an ever-shifting product based on player performance, whether done by two different players or the same player at two different times, demonstrates the irreducibility of videogame textuality. Gordon Calleja's notion of *alterbiography* invites a similar understanding that regards the individual playthrough—a singular instantiation of a given game by an individual played at a particular time and place—as the core 'text' of a videogame due to it being the only version the player has experienced *as a game* (as opposed to viewing another person's playthrough as a recording, for instance) (p. 115). Yet Iser's notion of the virtual text demonstrates how this individual uniqueness of an act of reading

applies to all interpretations of any text. A text is therefore not merely an authoritative source that must be scoured for internally consistent meaning, but a dynamic communication between subject (or self) and object (or world) at a certain time and place that creates a new reality for the reader. Deconstructionist Jacques Derrida also tackled this through his notion of *differance*, a play on the homonymous relation between the French words différer, which can mean both to differ and defer. There is never a stable and unified text because a text is always encountered in a chain of relations to other texts (in spatial difference) and at a unique point in time (in temporal deference). As Spivak elucidates in her preface to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, "the two readings of the 'same' book show an identity that can only be defined as a differance. The book is not repeatable in its 'identity': each reading of the book produces a simulacrum of an 'original' that is itself the mark of the shifting and unstable subject… using and being used by a language that is also shifting and unstable" (xii). Even the physical textuality of a book can in this sense be said to be 'virtual.'

However, videogames take this irreducibility further in terms of their very structure and ontology as a textual artifact. A playthrough is not just a different or deferred interpretive engagement with a textual structure. It is the production of that structure in real-time. Even if all texts can be said to be virtual in their differance, there can be, materially speaking, a book with an unchanging arrangement of words. Is a book still a book when there is no reader reading it? There certainly seems to be. But is there still a game when there is no player playing it? Returning to Galloway's definition of videogames as action, I'm inclined to agree (2). A videogame can still exist as a physical artifact—whether exported into a disc, cartridge, or digital file—but the text cannot present itself without a player and will not

advance without their continuous physical action *and* mental interaction. In this sense, gameplay is an embodied performance as much as it is an art object, straddling the line between these well-theorized categories. Performance theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte contrasts the differences between art object and performed experience, as the immediacy of the latter transcends "the possibility and the effort to reflect, to constitute meaning, and to interpret the events" (17). At the same time, Fischer-Lichte argues that the visceral embodied affect of performance cannot be preserved through recording and the "presence effects" of electronic mediation, as it creates "the *impression* of presentness without actually bringing forth these bodies or objects as present… by dematerializing and disembodying [them]" (100). While this foregrounds an important aesthetic distinction between performance art and digital gameplay, it also helps conceptualize how videogames' dual textual nature as digital artifact and active performance combines the immediacy of presence *and* the reflective detachment of representation. Players can therefore derive meaning from both the "unpredictable… states of consciousness" involved in embodied performance and the "predictable" generated meanings involved in reflective perception of an object (Fischer-Lichte 150-151). This performance-oriented look adheres to Voorhees's idea that "the meaning and significance of games is controlled by neither players nor games but rather lies in the gameplay enacted where player and game interface" (10).

3.3.3 Synthesizing Gameplay and Narrative Design

What makes videogames' textuality compelling is the player's co-determination of the text itself as fluid performer of gameplay and perceiver of its fixed representations. This

realization has informed much phenomenological and feminist scholarship on videogames, as well as the underground wave of game criticism that informed and stemmed from The New Games Journalism. New Games Journalism was coined by *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* founder Kieron Gillen in a blog post manifesto from 2004. The manifesto came as a critique of the heavy commercial focus of videogame writing found in popular magazines, which tended to dwell on shallow, consumer-facing topics such as "does the game have good graphics," "are the controls intuitive," "what character do you play as?" and the ever-present question: "is it fun?"

Gillen's New Games Journalism has just two principles to guide more nuanced, exploratory, and openly subjective writing for game critics: "1) The worth of gaming lies in the gamer, not the game. 2) Write travel journalism to Imaginary Places." On the first tenant, he expands: "What a gamer feels and thinks as this alien construct takes over all their sensory inputs is what's interesting here, not just the mechanics of how it got there"; and for the second, he writes: "Our job is to describe what it's like to visit a place that doesn't exist outside of the gamer's head — the gamer, not the game, remember. Go to a place, report on its cultures, foibles, distractions and bring it back to entertain your readers" (Gillen). Like Italo Calvino, the Italian author who wrote travel logs about imaginary cities, the New Games Journalist takes reports on an experience that existed solely for them and brings it into reality for others to read and learn from. This practice turns videogames, and the writing players produce about their gameplay experiences, into what Marcel O'Gorman calls an "object to think with" as a medium for self-reflection derived from technology yet resistant to technoculture's false promises of immortality, objectivity, and infinitude (4).

NGJ "asks the question "Why game anyway" and then gives as many answers as [there] are people, as interesting as people, as precious" (Gillen). I advocate for a revitalisation of these central tenants in conjunction with the many feminist, queer, and racialized works of games scholarship that advocate for a similar methodology. Sarah Stang, for instance, wrote a "Close Reading Methodology for Feminist Games Studies" that "centralizes the scholar's perspective, subjectivity, and experience, which is particularly important when the scholar occupies a less privileged subject position and can speak to systemic oppression as it is intertwined with mediated content" (236). Similarly, games journalist Austin Walker advocates for how "phenomenological, and anthropological records of play, such as blogs, journal and diary entires, let's players, forum posts" etc. can help create "a living library of play experiences" to preserve how it feels to play a game at a certain point of time and from a specific positionality. Whether scholar or online critic, many writers (often those from marginalized backgrounds) have made meaningful efforts to understand the games they play through the lens of their identities and experiences: from the piece about *Jedi Knight II* that inspired Gillen's manifesto, Starkey's review of *Never Alone* discussed above, Ruberg's queering of *Pong* in *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, Ash Parrish's analysis of *South of Midnight*'s homages to Southern Black culture, or Tim Rogers' reflection on his childhood upbringing in "Action Button Reviews *Boku no Natsuyasumi*." Stang's methodology can work in tandem with New Games Journalism, centralizing the player's subjectivity while documenting their interaction with the videogame's audiovisual representations and co-created narrative meaning.

What remains to be accounted for in this methodology is how to incorporate the key formal elements of videogames into such player-centric analysis. In his introduction to a collection on Russian Formalism, Morson observes that "The Formalists err because they forget real, lived human experience, which always comes with purposes, in order to focus on raw material and form, which do not" (Introduction 11). Similarly, the legacy of ludology (or videogame formalism) for game studies is one of a movement too insularly focused on the formal, rule-based aspects of games to the neglect of the way players connect with games and what meanings they might have in the greater context of human life.

I will now touch on existing game analysis scholarship to briefly explore how a formalist approach can be synthesized with otherwise subjective accounts of gameplay. This will help create a methodology for interpreting narrative design that manages to trace singular gameplay experience back to the formal elements that present themselves in the game. Consalvo and Dutton apply a formal approach to videogames by trying to identify the particular elements of gameplay and UI that express meaning and uniting them into a coherent interpretation. In trying to identify what features might constitute the 'text' of a videogame, Consalvo and Dutton settle on four areas of analysis: Object Inventory, Interface Study, Interaction Map, and Gameplay Log.

- **Object Inventory** involves "what game object are most central to gameplay and how players engage with them functionally" and thus constitute game systems and mechanics.

- **Interface Study** relates to how systems and mechanics are represented in the on-screen UI, and invites questioning of what information is privileged, what is withheld, and what its presentation and purpose communicates to the player.
- **Interaction Mapping** constitutes the nonlinear potentials and divergences of a game. This assumes the understanding that gameplay can never be reduced to a singular text—only the possibilities for interaction it affords—demanding greater attention to the game as a possibility space rather than a fixed, coherent narrative. Interaction Mapping also includes the game's possibilities for NPC interactions and how interpersonal relationships are contextualized by gameplay.
- **Gameplay Log** is "the overall 'world' of the game and the emergent gameplay that can come into being" (Consalvo and Dutton). The gameplay log thus accounts for the representation of the world and characters that every player will encounter during play. As a log, however, it also involves the study of gameplay as it emerges to the individual player, and thus naturally melds formal elements like mechanics and visual aesthetic with "interesting accidents" (like glitches) as materials constituting player experience. It is the objective representations of the game as they are encountered subjectively by the player as a holistic gameplay experience.

Consalvo and Dutton note that information from each of these areas should be combined for a holistic approach to analyzing the whole of a game as text. While the game elements they cover are sound, none of these areas have become common language in game studies.

To address this terminological issue, I'd like to propose alternative names that will be more readily accessible to non-academics. As these categories are meant to adhere to the textuality of narrative design, they each draw on the labor of the different members of the game development team that the narrative designer is likely to collaborate with. It is also worth noting that each of these categories, from both the developers' and players' perspectives, can be imbued with rhetorical and narrative significance that contributes to the overall 'meaning' the game elicits.

- **Systems and Mechanics**: This pertains to the rule-based affordances and haptic feel of the game), which tends to be developed by programmers, game designers, animators.
- **User Interface**: This pertains to the presentation of game information, which tends to be developed by UI designers and artists.
- **Possibility Space**: This pertains to the range of explorable space and executable action in the game; i.e. the non-linear text as designed. This is established across environment artists, level designers, and game designers.
- **Audiovisual-Haptic Elements**: This category was not explicitly covered in Consalvo and Dutton works, but I argue that it deserves to be separated from the others. Its inclusion as a category is inspired by the term use in Keogh's *A Play of Bodies*. This pertains to the visual rendering of environments and characters, the sound design's accompaniment to game action, and the kinesthetic feel of moving through the

game's world. Concept artists, sound designers, 3D/2D modelers, composers, cinematic artists all contribute to the audiovisual-haptic presentation.

- **Gameplay Experience**: This is the sum of the above elements as encountered individually, linearly, and holistically by a given player in a single playthrough. Players develop their own gameplay experiences through the elements provided by the developers.

The development roles named here are not exhaustive, as teams of different sizes may result in multiple people contributing to a single facet of the game, or a single person contributing to multiple facets of a game. Here, I only wish to provide more context for the multifaceted creation process and textuality of a videogame. These textual categories, when used for game analysis, are a valuable way of theoretically balancing the multiple distinct yet intertwined elements underlying a videogame's narrative design. However, for the purpose of exploring the subjective meaning of one's gameplay, Gameplay Experience is the category that ontologically overrules the others. While the other four areas are objectively tied to the game's representations, procedurality, and rules—which are all key aspects of the game as object—the Gameplay Experience constitutes how these elements are encountered. Although these other aspects of narrative design can be abstracted from the player's encounter of them, a player's interpretation of narrative design ultimately derives from how it is experienced holistically. Any 'pure' formalist study of design, story, or art, for instance, would involve ignoring the very ontology of the digital game: an artifact that comes into being through

being played—where, to again quote Galloway, "the work itself is material action" (2). Like the game itself, the textuality of narrative design can only be emergent and co-created.[63]

As Iser notes, there are two poles to an artistic work: "the artistic pole is the author's text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader. In view of this polarity, it is clear that the work itself cannot be identical with the text or with the concretization, but must be situated somewhere between the two" (*Act of Reading* 21). My goal in Section 3 is to provide context regarding the creative processes behind both these poles as related to videogames. In the next section, I will go into greater depth regarding the labour behind this co-creation from the developers' side by synthesizing theoretical concepts about authorship from Foucault and Barthes with the labour and accreditation realities of the videogame industry. While certainly not exhaustive of the many different sizes and circumstances of development studios, this will provide a picture of how the thematic vision of narrative design is shaped individually and collectively, as well as the complex material contexts that separate vision, execution, and product.

3.4 Sustaining Videogame Authorship: Approaches for Developer-Centric Analysis

3.4.1 Interrogating the Corporate Author Function in Game Development

This section will interrogate the game industry's tendency to obscure the extent of labour behind many of the individuals involved in making games when promoting and selling them

[63] I have applied this method to public-facing features I've written for RPGFan under my own "Narrative Design Analysis" series.

(Cho et al., Švelch). Most often, creative authorship is attributed to a depersonalized developer name (e.g. Konami, Bethesda) or to the vision of a single creative director (e.g. Hideo Kojima[64], Todd Howard[65]) (Jankowski 4). In both cases, the work of a team that can range anywhere from two to 2000 people is subsumed under a monolithic and abstracted creative identity (O'Donnell, Švelch). This streamlined approach to attributed authorship has multiple consequences inside and outside academia. For one, it limits access to historical knowledge of what individual(s) worked on which aspect(s) of certain games over lengthy careers (Cho et al. 1421). By extension, it leaves scholars and critics with limited understandings of the material conditions and creative continuity that inform the games they discuss and analyze. To work towards amending this neglect, my goals in this section are to: 1) Offer a theoretical basis for discussing authorship in videogames; 2) Point out existing resources for tracking and understanding the creative labour of developers as individuals and teams; and 3) Apply knowledge from these resources towards a cursory analysis of a single developer's creative output.

While the material conditions of videogame creation are significantly more dispersed and variable than that of a literary text, literary criticism on authorship remains a useful starting point for understanding the broader complications with attributing creative authority. In "What is an Author?" Foucault analyzes the discursive function of the author. He deconstructs the author as an organizing device by which literary historians and critics group

[64] Game Director of celebrated titles such as *Metal Gear Solid* (1998) and *Death Stranding* (2019).
[65] Game Director of celebrated titles such as *Fallout 3* (2008) and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2012).

a selection of texts together in a manner that implies—that is, leads us to interpret—a legitimate authoritative connection between them (211). This "*author function*" emerged in the eighteenth century as a marker of prestige and a justification of canonization that is part of a culture's cultivation of its own self-conscious and ideologically charged metanarrative (Foucault 213). Canonization, then, can be seen as the curated inclusion and exclusion of certain texts' social relevance. Foucault's work shows us how literary criticism turns mere "texts" into "literature" through an exaltation of its author as someone worthy of study.

This individualistic veneration of an author figure has manifested in other collaborative arts; most famously, it has impacted film criticism through the concept of "auteur theory" popularized by critic Andrew Sarris, in which "the director is the 'author' of the film" as "the chief decision-makers who shape the narrative structure and meaning of cinematic works" (Cho et al. 1427). It is worth noting that Sarris' original intent with establishing the auteur theory was to "come closer than any other [critical method] to providing sufficient information on the meaning and style of the cinema" (30). This is a worthy intent regardless of all the fair criticism that has since been levied against the theory. Jankowski addresses these criticisms, including the hierarchical and chauvinistic effects that the auteur theory has had, while also leveraging its concept to study the style and influence of videogame freelance writer Meg Jayanth (3). Similarly, my intent here is to shed some light on the creative processes involved in game development while acknowledging both the purpose and limitations of Sarris' auteur theory and Foucault's author function in framing and understanding those processes. After all, both the development process and consumption

practice of videogames even further blur the lines in terms of from whom the 'meaning' of the object comes from (4).

Although videogame development tends to involve groups of people rather than a primary authorial source, the author function's place in artistic criticism and popular consciousness continues to inform the way videogame creation is conceived and discussed. However, there are some notable differences. In the games industry, authorship is formally presented on videogame box arts and upon booting the game through the name of the developer—a company name. Usually, the developer name is presented alongside a publisher name—the company that helps support, fund, and distribute the game. Some developers self-publish their work, but this is usually only managed by indie games with small teams and budgets or megacorporations like Nintendo, Square Enix, or Ubisoft that can afford to cover all the costs for their flagship 'first-party' titles. For most developers in between these two extremes, the role of the publisher is crucial for a game to reach an audience. The featuring of two company names is already a confusing move that can make it ambiguous what group is responsible for creating the game, especially for casual consumers less versed in industry names. Yet, even with this knowledge, attributing authorship to the name of a development team still obscures knowledge about the real people—the individual developers—who created the game.

For instance, *Final Fantasy VIII* (1999), *Final Fantasy IX* (2000), and *Final Fantasy X* (2001) were all developed by Square, are part of the same series, and were released only within a single year of each other. Yet, a glance at their credits shows discrepancies in almost every major creative role. Character design was handled by Tetsuya Nomura in *Final*

Fantasy VIII (*FF8*) and *Final Fantasy X* (*FFX*), which both have a realistically human-proportioned cast, but by Shukou Murase, Toshiyuki Itahana, Shin Nagasawa in *Final Fantasy IX* (*FF9*), which has a more diversely drawn fantastical cast. As another example, *FF8* and *FFX* are both written by Kazushige Nojima (albeit with additional help in the latter), while *FF9's* writing is handled by series creator Hironobu Sakaguchi and has a more lighthearted and fantastical tone than the other two games. Thus, while there is some consistent creative continuity between *FF8* and *FFX*, *FF9* has a significantly different staff. Here, neither the series nor company name sufficiently represent the creative inputs of even the game's most significant contributors; they primarily serve a *corporate* author function. At most, a developer name can signify a general design philosophy or aesthetic that the company brands themselves with and by which consumers can identify them. Meanwhile, a glance at online or magazine lists of the greatest game developers often pose series creator Sakaguchi as the creative auteur of the first 10 games in the series before he officially left developer Square ("Top 100"). Yet, his creative input on *FF8* and *FFX*, as shown in the games' credits, is limited to a supervisory Executive Producer role[66]. In this case, neither the auteur signifier "Sakaguchi" nor the company signifier "Square" accurately reflect the shifting creative leaders who developed these three games.

On this note, we also see the author function at play in the game industry's patrilineal celebration of "great men"—usually innovative technical programmers and genre-defining

[66] As an extended application of this line of research in a public-facing format, I organized a podcast on this subject with my coworkers Zach Wilkerson and Matt Wardell for *RPGFan's Retro Encounter* titled "Hironobu Sakaguchi Encounter." In the episode, we go through Sakaguchi's career influence while also crediting the creative collaborators whom he worked with.

designers—as Laine Nooney details. Despite game development being a highly collaborative and codependent creative process, our culture can't seem to help but want to attribute the authorship of a videogame to a single creative genius—especially if it has become part of the popularly accepted canon. These project leads, visionary designers, and innovative programmers are put on a similar pedestal to movie directors as auteurs. The positive side of this, much like in film's embrace of auteurs, is that it introduces real people with compelling ideas to popular understandings of game development, which studio-based production structures often black-box (Jankowski 3). The far-reaching consequence is that it leads to a highly reductive view of the reality of game development, which is often messy, highly collaborative, and malleable by a variety of internal and external forces.

So, what does this have to do with game analysis? The goal of this section, and the additional research it could potentially lead to, is to locate the creative contributions of individual developers in titles they have worked on to bridge player experience with artistic creation. In the previous section I described how gameplay, understood from the primary perspective of player experience, is already a fruitful and sufficient object of game analysis on its own. However, a player's interest in how videogames convey meaning does not need to end there. Here, I want to suggest that there is analytical and educational value in connecting the meanings players draw from their gameplay to the contributions of developers. This can give players more nuanced, intimate understandings of the games they study by promoting closer consideration of the many different (yet inevitably synthesized) elements of game design and development. At the same time, it can help shed light on the structurally underlooked work of individuals (or small groups of individuals) on development

teams. I want to begin developing a cursory method for studying the contributions of those whom Jankowski calls "shy decision-makers": workers who are not project leads or independent developers, but who "can profoundly influence a game's narrative, mechanics, and overall ambiance. Through their work, they have the potential to redefine a essence, underscoring the power of those who operate from the shadows" (5). This mode of research makes use of the information available about these collaborative processes—even if it is just a list of credits—to think more accurately and specifically about the labour that individual developers contribute. What is most important right now is a shift in the way we write and think about game development that works to amend the problematic black boxing of the game industry and its current deployment of a corporatized author function.

This shift asks for a greater consideration of material practices in analyzing the meaning of a game—whether through the subversively subjective practice of feminist close reading (Ruberg, Stang "Too Close") or a more strictly formalist reading of game design. A t attempts a similar solution in their study of Sierra On-line lead designer Roberta Williams. Nooney proposes a twist on media archaeology "with a critical care toward what media archaeology so often ignores: human specificity, the way enactments of power fall upon certain types of bodies more than others." Nooney refers to this practice as media "speleology" noting, "Spelunking, in contrast [to archaeology], is a phenomenologically imprecise encounter—I can only see so much at any one time. The shape I hollow out here relies on non-continuity and the inability to apprehend the historical field in its wholeness." Spelunking, therefore, consciously embraces its own limits in making phenomenological inferences based on enlightening yet inconclusive historical research. With this method, I

propose we spelunk our way through the mess of attributions, scattered documentation, and developer anecdotes available as a way of informing game analyses or other games research. Whereas Roland Barthes' proclamation of "The Death of the Author" for literary criticism in 1968 helped foreground the material—rather than monolithically individual—practices of writing, the disposability and anonymity of workers in the current game industry (Schreier, O'Donnell, Švelch) calls for the opposite antidote: an appreciation for the individual and collaborative labour that gets structurally overlooked. Much game studies scholarship has leaned towards formalist (Eskelinen; Consalvo and Dutton) or phenomenological (Leino, "Death Loop"; Arjoranta) models of game analysis. I argue that research on and consideration of creative contributions can add to game analysis—not to re-inscribe the romanticization of authorial identity and biography that Barthes productively deconstructs, but to appreciate and critically contextualize the labour that goes into making a videogame. This can also promote a more active game literacy among players, critics, and scholars alike.

3.4.2 Spelunking for Game Development Attribution

Current means of uncovering the creative authorship of game development is scattered throughout a range of publications across websites and books (Whitson). While perhaps obvious, I want to highlight the value of crowdsourced resources such as MobyGames and Wikipedia as starting points for tracking individual developers' contributions across time and development teams and finding primary resources where available. Most ideally, we would have as thorough reportage of the working conditions of a team as is showcased in Double Fine Productions' *PsychOdyssey*. The *PsychOdyssey* YouTube documentary series, created

in collaboration with 2 Player Games, provides over 20 hours of extensive footage detailing the collaborative process and individual experiences of developers throughout *Psychonauts 2's* development. In doing so, it reveals different staff members' creative, practical, and emotional labour at multiple stages of the project. Unfortunately, Double Fine's effort in preserving their games' development processes is a major exception rather than the industry standard. More than anything, *PsychOdyssey* reveals how little the average consumer knows about the nuances of game development, and how reductive the way critics, journalists, and even scholars talk about videogame authorship can be. We may never get the equivalent of *PsychOdyssey* from any other videogame studio, but it can serve as an ideal for this speleology to strive towards. There are other valuable resources out there, such as Noclip's developer documentaries on YouTube. However, to research the work of teams and individuals that don't have such official, high-profile coverage, a large degree of spelunking is necessary.

Mobygames is an essential starting point. For any title one looks up, the site lists credits in the order that they appear in the game's credits sequence. This makes it a productive resource to examine the lack of standardization in the industry, and how certain development teams choose to prioritize specific roles in the credits hierarchy over others. On one hand, regulated standardization can be an important way to ensure fair and accurate credits are given to everyone who worked on a game; on the other hand, flexibility can be a productive way for a development team to customize credits to the creative priorities of their game. For instance, a major priority for Upper One Games, the development team of *Never Alone*, is how it adapts a traditional Native Alaskan story into its storytelling and gameplay

mechanics. Accordingly, the game's credits begin not by highlighting the lead designer or programmer, but the Iñupiaq Cultural Ambassadors and Translators that helped make the game as authentic to the culture it strives to represent as possible. This goes against the International Game Developer Association's (or IGDA's) proposed credit order, which does mandate the crediting of cultural consultants, but not over the work of the game's designers and programmers—who are standardised as the top of a studio's creative hierarchy (9). *NieR* (Cavia, 2010) is another intriguing anomaly of game credits as it lists all staff in alphabetical order alongside their role, with no headings to create a hierarchy amongst the roles. Even the game's renowned director and oft-cited auteur of the medium, Yoko Taro, is listed evenly with the rest of the team.

Wikipedia can be another helpful source for understanding game authorship. For each game page, it curates the names of creatives in key leadership roles in an area sectioned off at the top-right. This selective curation is limiting on its own, but paired with Mobygames can be a useful way for researchers to single out names of key creatives in the industry. For instance, I used this approach in researching the authorship of *Final Fantasy VIII* and *Final Fantasy IX* as discussed above. Of especial value on Wikipedia pages is the Development section, which collates the documented history of a game's development while linking to the sources the information was pulled from. Considering much of even a single game's history is scattered across a variety of websites, books, interviews, and postmortems, Wikipedia game pages' "Development" section can be convenient for beginning this type of research. Unfortunately, these sections are only ever as thorough as the available resources allow,

which means big-budget and 'canonized' titles have far more documentation than lesser-known games.

This critique is not meant to discredit the creative achievements of design leads, groundbreaking programmers, or project directors. It is to acknowledge that many of these figures have been treated and studied as distinguished individual creators while shy decision-makers who contributed their own vision and labour to their projects deserve their own authorial credit. IGDA have taken notable steps to standardize videogame accreditation to ensure that part-time workers, external hires, and developers who did not remain on the team by the time of release, etc. get represented in game credits. At the same time, their guidelines attempt to standardize a hierarchical sorting of roles in the team, and project leads from those who work under them, to organize and highlight key team members. This leads to potential misconceptions about the creation process that can stem from such standards. To return to Double Fine and *Psychonauts 2* as an example, the studio head Tim Schafer is one of the game industry's most celebrated auteur figures. He was even one of the "game gods" in the *PC Gamer* feature that Nooney discusses. Following this logic, one might assume that he was hands-on in every aspect of *Psychonauts 2's* development, but the documentary reveals this as far from the case. For most of the development process he locked himself away in his room to focus on writing while all other aspects of the game were sorted out in both tense and productive interactions between level designers, animators, producers, and others, who often lamented his hands-off leadership. *Psychodyssey* gave names, faces, and stories to those individuals. Next, I would like to try to achieve something similar by applying this method to the work of a developer.

3.4.3 Case Study: Yoshiaki Koizumi

I would now like to present an example of how tracing the creative outputs of individual developers using the resources mentioned can add to, rather than derail from, established analytical models. As an example of developer spelunking, I will now discuss the developer Yoshiaki Koizumi's credits on a few games from *The Legend of Zelda* franchise to attempt to articulate his creative voice and how this understanding can inform analysis of those titles, Koizumi himself, or Nintendo. I selected Koizumi for a few reasons: 1) he works for Nintendo, a company notorious for upholding a clean image at the cost of black boxing their hardware and development practices; 2) he has worked in a number of different creative roles, which offers a helpful way to frame videogame authorship from multiple creative angles; 3) his name should be familiar to some, but he isn't widely known as an industry auteur. I will illustrate my process of spelunking into Koizumi's career and summarize my findings' value for potential analysis. I've played all the games I discuss, which I see as important to this method for understanding how one (or several) creative contributions fit into the larger 'text' of a game. To examine any developer's work in a vacuum risks negating the work of others that surrounds it, contextualizes it, and gives it meaning when played.

Koizumi's first chronological credit is for *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* (Nintendo, 1991), which lists him as one of five contributors for the game's "Printed Art Work," the job he was hired on to do. But sources reveal that he actually undertook more during the development process and just was not properly credited for it. In a 2007 interview with Wired, Koizumi notes that when beginning his work on the game "...it didn't seem like they'd really figured out what most of the game elements meant. So it was up to me to come

up with story and things while I was working on the manual" (qtd. in Kohler). The project lead and venerated game auteur, Shigeru Miyamoto, is known to downplay the importance of story in videogames. As an attempt to counteract this, Koizumi wrote the opening pages of the manual as an exploration of the mythology of Hyrule, the game's setting. The Zelda franchise didn't have much of a narrative identity up to this point, outside the standard save-the-princess trope that Miyamoto frequently relied on (Feminist Frequency), and the formally written creation story here seems like a key step in securing the mythical aesthetic still prevalent across its many entries. Manuals were important videogame paratexts throughout the 1990s that covered narrative context and displayed artwork that did not exist in the game itself. Reading Koizumi's mythology can impress upon the player a sense of atmosphere to the game world that they are then able to project into their gameplay.

Koizumi's first official writing credit was for 1993's *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening*. *Link's Awakening* ditches the mythical fantasy aesthetic of *A Link to the Past* for an unconventional and ambitious narrative for the time. Instead of needing to rescue princess Zelda from an ancient evil, protagonist Link shipwrecks onto an island where he is told that the only way to leave is to wake the Wind Fish that sleeps in a giant egg atop the island's highest mountain. In a traditionally videogame-y way, Link must collect MacGuffins in the form of instruments hidden in the island's various dungeons. What makes *Link's Awakening* stand out is its dream-like atmosphere, established through the odd setting and cryptic writing. NPC dialogue makes every person and directive in *Link's Awakening* feel consciously artificial, and the ending's revelation that Link has been trapped in a dream transcends cliché by presenting it as a metacommentary on videogames. As with Link here,

everything players experience in a videogame is an artificial construction, but it doesn't mean that real feelings and personal revelations cannot stem from that. *The Legend of Zelda* series was not celebrated for its storytelling up to this point, but Koizumi worked to make it a more prominent aspect of the games' identities.

Koizumi then worked on 1998's *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* as a co-director and character designer. NPCs felt much more unique here than in previous Zelda games, partly owing to their distinct visual appearance. This attention to NPCs again helped the Zelda series evolve narratively, with plenty of side characters such as Sheik (Zelda's gender-bending and powerful alter ego), Ganondorf (a more humanized version of the series' main villain Ganon), and other races such as the Gorans and Zora becoming iconic characters in the series. But Koizumi is perhaps best known as the Game Systems Director of *Majora's Mask*, which reuses the character assets from *Ocarina of Time* due to the game having a lower budget and urgent time constraints for release. This is creatively leveraged in the game, which like *Link's Awakening* ditches the series' formulaic Hyrule setting and save-the-princess narrative trope. The primary game system here is also its main narrative device: in only 3 days, the moon will crash into the game world. Link's job is to avert this apocalyptic scenario—something only he can do with his power to rewind time and reset the 3-day cycle. Players explore traditional dungeons while helping the game world's NPCs deal with personal, even existential crises, only to revert the cycle repeatedly until the final resolution is reached. Since the three days progress in real time, the game's NPCs all have schedules that the player must pay attention to piece together how to help them. Through this system, *Majora's Mask* works as a poignant examination of trauma and a metacommentary on player

agency. No matter how many NPCs a player spent time helping, all these scenarios revert to their initial state by the end of the game. Perhaps due to the game receiving a mixed reception from fans and critics on release, Koizumi would never have another major creative credit on a *Zelda* game despite still working at Nintendo, and the series would never experiment with its narrative expression to this extent again. With that said, the mainline *Zelda* games' celebrated storytelling might have never become this prominent if not for Koizumi's early career ambitions that worked against the grain of Nintendo's ludic-centric corporate auteur identity.

To sum up, this spelunking process brought out a few findings that could be applied to further research from multiple disciplinary angles. For one, Koizumi entered the industry to explore its narrative potential and worked towards this across his multiple different roles on early Zelda games. His early career as a shy decision-maker and then temporary project lead demonstrates how creative influence on the end-product of a game can come from various positions on a team. Secondly, *Link's Awakening* and *Majora's Mask* share dream-like atmospheres and metatextual narrative themes, suggesting their own creative continuity while diverging from the series' tropes. Company, series, and auteur names can be misleading in tracing videogame authorship, and spelunking through individual developers' careers can be a productive antidote to this fallacy. Nintendo became more narratively risk-averse in the new millenium, and Koizumi would cease to push the medium forward in this way from here on. Instead, Nintendo's front-facing auteur of Shigeru Miyamoto and his gameplay-first philosophy would be projected as the company's primary authorial identity. In keeping with Looney's application of speleology as an interrogation of the ways power falls

on specific bodies more than others, we also see how Japanese men have been at once respected yet culturally othered globally, such as in the curious omissions of even auteur figures like Miyamoto and Sakaguchi from PC Gamer's "Game Gods" feature. As for Koizumi, his influence in Nintendo had long been obscured by being cast in the shadow of Miyamoto despite his narrative-driven creativity being foundational to the *Zelda* franchise's growing global appeal. These findings have interesting implications for Social Science-based games researchers looking at industry labour practices, or Humanities games researchers conducting analytical readings on these titles or exploring historically significant innovations in game design and/or narrative design.

As conceived by Nooney and applied here, this spelunking process to uncover the material realities of game development can be imprecise and inconclusive. Yet, it can also open new avenues for analyzing games and deconstructing industry discourse. While this is quite a broad and brief study, I hope it demonstrates some value in this method by encouraging researchers to: 1) Develop a more accurate understanding of the collaborative authorship of videogames; 2) bring a name and work history to the appreciation of individual game elements when analyzing them; 3) look for common themes across an individual developer's work to appreciate their creative contributions and their role in larger company dynamics; and 4) unpack problematic discrepancies in accreditation, power dynamics that may have skewed creative input, and examine alternative crediting practice that expose potential flaws in the IGDA's standards. I believe this research method can guide analysis from established game studies models with a fresh, informed perspective. A sustainable future for game studies is one where the work of hundreds of developers is not subsumed by

the cult of a single auteur leading a team of creative individuals or an impersonal company name.

The remainder of Section 3 is comprised of articles that were submitted for publication through peer review and build on the discussions of narrative design, game authorship, and game history covered in the section thus far. The first of these papers, "Incorporating Discursive Design in Critical Play: On the Making of Prometheus: A Discourse Reflection Game for Engineers" is a scholarly postmortem on my process creating a Twine game where the player roleplays a software engineer working at a startup. I connect my vision for the narrative design of the game with the creative process and the research on discursive design and critical play that informed it. The following paper, "Iterating Game Series Identity: Mixed-Methods Analysis of the Creative Process Developing *Dragon Quest I-VI,*" applies a mixed-methods approach drawing on computer science and humanities research methods to conduct an analysis of the historically influential *Dragon Quest* series that bridges material constraints that the developers had to work with, such as hardware limitations, with the creative process that went into iterating the game design and narrative design of the series' first six games. Together with what has been discussed so far, Section 3 provides a window into the material realities of game development and the multi-disciplinary textuality of videogames that can be applied towards existing research on game development and analysis.

3.5 Paper 4: Incorporating Discursive Design in Critical Play: On the Making of *Prometheus: A Discourse Reflection Game for Engineers*

3.5.1 Introduction

This paper discusses a text-based narrative game, *Prometheus*, that I created using Twine, a free software used for the creation of interactive narratives. I gave *Prometheus* the subtitle "Discourse Reflection Game" because the purpose is to expose engineers (the intended player audience) to critically reflective attitudes about industry practices that they may not have ever needed to engage with in their practice-based studies. I was inspired by critical design tools such as the *Tarot of Tech* and *Tech Risk Zones*, both created by the Artefact Group to help facilitate discussions surrounding the hidden consequences and ethical implications of engineering designs. My game, however, deviates from these overtly pedagogical tools in that it relies on fictional narrative, procedural rhetoric, and the agency afforded by player interactivity to generate a virtual space that is meant to facilitate critical reflection for its primary audience. Approaching the project led me to synthesize perspectives on *critical design* and *discursive design* with *critical play*: a term devised by Mary Flanagan to address how different types of play, including that provided by digital games, can "function as means for creative expression, as instruments for conceptual thinking, or as tools to help examine or work through social issues… to discover thematic ways in which play can continue to manifest critical thinking" (1, 3). These theoretical frameworks informed my design process by leading me to ensure that the rhetorical functionality of *Prometheus'* gameplay reinforces my intention that it promote reflection on engineering discourse by encouraging identification and compassion for its fictional characters and the attitudes

towards design that they express. By doing so, I hope that it can point towards the validity for fiction-based digital games to serve as pedagogical tools through focused narrative design based around real-world discourse and related non-fictional stories.

To provide more context, *Prometheus* is a prototype created as part of a Learning Innovation and Teaching Enhancement (LITE) Seed Grant from the University of Waterloo. I made it in a limited time frame with a small amount of resources. I never released it publicly because I believe aspects of its depiction of characters from diverse backgrounds could be improved with a more extensive research process involving community consultations, which were outside of the project's scope. Nevertheless, I think its methodology and design can provide fruitful discussion on how developer-educators can strive to blend entertainment and pedagogy.

3.5.2 About the Game

Prometheus' story surrounds an unnamed engineer who works for a tech startup, called Prometheus, at an incubator. The gameplay revolves around making personally and ethically contextualized dialogue choices through sequential conversations with three different non-player characters (NPCs). In the order that they appear, these characters include: Darren, a black man who used to be the protagonist's roommate in university but is now stuck working at an Amazon warehouse; Anna, the protagonist's teenage daughter who has recently become invested in social justice issues through joining a club at her school; and Mike, the protagonist's morally detached co-worker at their tech startup. Each NPC is the central subject of their own scenario, and the player progresses through these scenes by

selecting dialogue options that can result in toxic or positive responses. The main subject of these conversations is Bizantium, an AI-based smart energy monitoring facility designed for installation in office buildings and warehouses. Whether the player obtains a fulfilled 'good ending' (i.e. leading to a reciprocal resolution of the conversation) or a premature 'bad ending' (with the conversation being cut off) for Darren and Anna's scenario depends on them expressing interest in learning more about ethical concerns surrounding Bizantium and tech design practice that the two have developed from an outsider perspective. If the player makes it to the good ending of either of the first two scenarios, they will have more choices in Mike's scenario, including access to the most critical-minded finale where they defy Mike's unquestioning capitalist inclination to accept Amazon's compromising investment in Bizantium.

3.5.3 Making the Game

The game's writing expresses critical design values through the characters Darren and Anna who are, importantly, not at all educated in design. They are laypeople who are capable of critical thinking and skeptical about the thoughtless development of technology based on their experiences and beliefs. As a black man and a young woman, respectively, Darren and Anna also represent positionalities which are too often systematically constrained in predominantly white, male-dominated makerspaces. Including these diverse voices is essential to debunking the Eurocentric notion of universal subjectivity epitomized in supposedly 'objective' conceptions of scientific research and digital algorithms in particular. In a chapter where she problematizes the concept of universal subjectivity in design practice,

Roopika Risam explains that "[u]niversalism in the context of human cognition and humanoid texts brings with it the presumption that 'science' mitigates cultural biases and is immune to difference. However, it only manages to reinforce the politics, cultures, and aesthetics of dominant cultural paradigms" (Risam).[67] In its adherence to the sociocultural tradition, discursive design "denies the notion of universal truth" through consideration of the unique perspectives and experiences afforded by cultural diversity and relativity (B. and S. Tharp 106). As a white male creator going into this project, it was therefore essential that I engaged in research about engineering practices and its culture's suppression of marginalized groups and experiences to overcome the epistemic limitations of my own positionality.

I should specify that Risam's techno-philosophical discussion of universalism is Risam further examines how "universalist framings of the 'human' are produced through natural language processing software, machine learning, and algorithms." She frames this notion as a dangerous misconception in AI-based, industrial design practice. The communication represented in my game is not generated through these digitized, artificial means, but has all been written in advance by a human and critically informed by research to explicitly represent discursive nuances through its characters. In one part of the player's conversation with Darren, he discredits the notion that design can be 'universal' and, therefore, unbiased. I wrote that part of Darren's conversation with the ideas from Risam's chapter in mind to ensure the writing was situated in the light of socially conscious theory.

[67] Risam's critique of the universalist presumption in science and technology progress should not be confused with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, which is a pedagogical effort to make a certain design or practice as accessible to as many different groups as possible.

Aside from drawing on ideas in academic publications, I wanted to ensure that the content covered in *Prometheus'* multiple conversations came off as authentic by adapting content from relevant stories by news sources, including: a *New York Post* article detailing "the hellish workday of an Amazon warehouse employee" (Spitznagel); a *UX Planet* article providing examples of "how racism manifests itself in design" (Palaniyappan); an *Intelligencer* article that describes how Smart Home technology contributes to e-waste (Paulas); and a *Forbes* article that explains how intellectual property rights work in tech startups (Harroch). I wanted to ensure my writing was informed not only by academic ideas and theories, but also by real experiences that I do not have access to from my own privileged position as a white, male Humanities scholar.

Drawing from these experiences, I tried to write each NPC as a distinct individual with their own voice while also having them represent certain perspectives informed by lived experience, such as racial marginalization, the working class, environmentalism, white privilege, etc. This was difficult to balance—especially in trying to represent different subject positions while avoiding problematic stereotypes—but essential to ensure that the NPCs seemed more like fictional characters in an immersive narrative that the player can strive to understand rather than talking heads that come off as overly didactic. Because critical design is "an *affective*, rather than an explanatory, practice" the effectiveness of the game's storytelling is tied to its impact as a critical tool (Malpass 41). Beyond my intention for the game to function effectively as a critical tool, I hope this process also highlights the need for designers and writers to consciously engage in research that compensates for the limits of their positionality as a way of minimizing the potential harm of their work.

3.5.4 Integrating Discursive Design in Narrative Design

While the game is meant to function as a critical tool, its branching conversation paths means it does not express a single overt message or argument. Bruce and Stephanie Tharp's *Discursive Design* was the primary theoretical backbone supporting *Prometheus'* design process because the purpose of the game is focused more on fleshing out a range of discursive contexts for the player to consider and reflect on than inculcating a particular critical stance—an intention that the Tharps associate specifically with critical design. In contrast, the Tharps want to distance their central term, discursive design, from a type of academic elitism that would presume to understand an approach to design that is best for society. Their post-critical approach is concerned with *the projective*: "It looks into the future and to what's possible without necessarily being tethered to an intentional counter-stance against the sociocultural status quo" (B. and S. Tharp 92). The idea that discursive designs can "amicably engage industry and capitalism" instead of solely critiquing them from a distance is crucial to my intentions with *Prometheus* (B. and S. Tharp 91). With gameplay focused on expressive narrative structure over ludic challenges, my work on *Prometheus* also pulls on the commercial practice of narrative design: creating a golden path [i.e. main story] providing the logic, context, and escalating dramatic action that further a player's progress" (Berger 21). Discursive design is broad enough to work together with narrative design's framework of immersing players into a fictional experience along with any thematic or didactic intent.

To try to make *Prometheus* work as both an immersive narrative experience and a design object with didactic intentions, I tried to be mindful of ensuring that the game does

not alienate its engineer players by condescending to them with presumptions about their lack of interest in ethics or by telling them how they should do their jobs. When discussing the method of how game designers can facilitate critical play, Flanagan notes**:** "play occurs only when players feel comfortable. Play is, by definition, a safety space. If a designer or artist can make safe spaces that allow the negotiation of real-world concepts, issues, and ideas, then a game can be successful in facilitating the exploration of innovative solutions for apparently intractable problems" (261). Narrative design works in the nebulous gap between the purely commercial and the resolutely critical as opposed spheres and can lean further one way or the other depending on its intended audience. As a non-commercial narrative-driven game whose impact depends on the player feeling immersed in their character role, an important goal was to craft an experience that is inviting to its audience of engineers even as it challenges any preconceived assumptions about their own work.

By situating sociocultural concerns surrounding design practice in a believable fiction that follows a fellow engineer, the intention with *Prometheus'* design is to spark compassion for the often-unheard perspectives of laypeople and promote critical thinking without being overtly oppositional. Working within the framework of discursive design, the game's functionality is tied to its value as a communicative tool above all else:

> [discursive design] may never truly attempt a solution. Raising consciousness of the issue may be the full extent of its service… but instead of avoiding [problems] altogether or dealing with them superficially, discursive design uses its tools to affect reflection, acknowledging and trying to unpack the complexity as a means of possibly

> progressing toward a preferred state or at least identifying attributes of what one might look like or not look like. (B. and S. Tharp 77-78)

I intentionally avoided ending *Prometheus* (in any of the three possible endings) by presenting a clear, idealistic solution to the protagonist's moral dilemma. As a critical tool, the game is concerned more so with "problem-finding, or problem-framing," than the utilitarian problem-solving approach common with industrial design (B. Tharp and S. Tharp 78). The game's conversations highlight design as a practice rife with ethical dilemmas by fleshing out a few specific contexts in which design invention and method can be problematized. In Darren's scenario, for instance, the game illustrates how Bizantium's design, a system that influences how blue-collar workers exist and are surveilled in the workplace, ignores the perspective of the workers themselves. Even the game's third ending (named "end 3" and "end 3-2" in the Twine file), which the player reaches if they profess a need for socially conscious engagement in the design process to their startup partner, is filled with uncertainty about what will happen next. What is crucial, however, is that reaching this ending requires the player to consider the value of an approach to design that accounts for consequences that would not normally be considered in the design process.

In this sense, the game's purpose as a story and as a design object complement each other. To explain the intrinsic relationships between discourse and design, and the multiple approaches by which this relationship manifests, Bruce and Stephanie Tharp present the *about-for-through* tripartite model (78). While discursive designs primarily serve as examples of *discourse-through-design*, in that they tend to be physical artifacts that communicate abstractly, my game draws from all three categories of the model. It manages

this by combining writing that is engaged with the practical and ethical nuances of design work with an approach to game/narrative design that speaks rhetorically through the interactions it enables. Therefore, while the fiction represented in the game's text is *discourse-about-design*, in that the practice of design is its principal theme, my intention with making the game is "for the purpose of" design with the hope that the discursive attitudes reflected in the game's interactions "could help improve design teaching and practice" (B. Tharp and S. Tharp 79). Finally, the game also functions as discourse-through-design since it is a procedural, interactive program that promotes critical engagement through its very design. While I wanted to ensure the game did not come off as overly didactic by allowing the player to make choices that both embrace and resist critical attitudes towards design practice, reaching the amicable ending of both Darren and Anna's scenarios requires the player to be open-minded to these characters' perspectives. Doing so is also the only way to access the game's most critically minded third ending, providing a small ludic incentive to accessing content I regard as important to the experience—whether on a first playthrough or second run. The game's three-act and multiple ending structure all constitute its "narrative system," synthesizing progression criteria, writing, and programming logic into the game's rhetoric (Berger 24-25). In this way, the game's design "operates as a discursive modality" in that it prompts the player to behave open-mindedly, even though it does not impose this stance (B. Tharp and S. Tharp 79).

3.5.5 Designing for Critical Play

It is here that design theory focusing primarily on the design of artifacts no longer suffices to address the critical functionality of a digital game like *Prometheus* alone. To account for the unique critical affordances of game design, the game incorporates ideas from Mary Flanagan's *Critical Play*, which focuses on how "games carry beliefs within their representation systems and mechanics… for they are the material properties of games, much like marble and chisel or pen and ink bring with them their own intended possibilities, limitations, and conventions" (4). Aside from being able to incorporate more direct expressions of discourse such as text and images to accompany the game design itself, games "are also something *beyond artifact* in that [they] also function as a set of activities that carry conventions like audience role, interaction, currency, and exchange" (Flanagan 259). The procedural and participatory nature of games necessitates a careful consideration of how the aesthetics of the gameplay experience will facilitate "meaningful presence," which critical design theorist Matt Malpass defines "in terms of how the object expresses itself when the user encounters it" (49). Malpass emphasizes that "critical design works best when it is operating within a context of use," which makes computer games—a medium premised on the interactive participation of a user/player—ripe for rhetorical and affective potential (11). Yet, similar to how critical design has been conceptualized in a dichotomy with industrial/affirmative design, Flanagan explains that designing for critical play necessitates a conscious departure from the masculine power fantasies that constitute much of the commercial gaming market.

Although it is important that *Prometheus* is engaging to play for its audience, since it would otherwise fail to affect them intellectually and emotionally, it is not built primarily for entertainment purposes. The gameplay does not invite the player to bask in graphically detailed aesthetics or provide any sense of pure ludic pleasure; instead, it borrows from the conversation systems encountered in many digital role-playing games while repurposing it for a particular, productive goal surrounding a "real" fiction: an intentionality that Flanagan deems crucial to "activist gaming" (252). Not only does my game try to represent authentic conversations based in reality, but it immerses the player in a role (an engineer) that they will be or already are acting out in their own lives. It is, crucial to its critical potential, detached from any fictional context familiar to commercial games. This allows the game to present itself as a tool, not just an entertainment product, to its intended "public" of engineers: "It is through the interactions within the constructed public that debate occurs and the system that the design work exists in—either real or fictional—is discussed and challenged" (Malpass 50). By designing *Prometheus* with a specific rhetorical purpose for a particular audience, I was able to incorporate what Flanagan terms *reflective practice* into my design process, which "encourages designers and technologists to verify that both their design goals and their values goals are supported" (256). Reflection and intentionality in the design process are cited by Malpass and the Tharps as key components of effective critical design.

While I have already touched on how discursive design draws on the sociocultural, critical, and semiotic traditions, the final mode through which it operates is the rhetorical: "As argued by Richard Buchanan, design practice in general is highly rhetorical, acting as a 'mediating agency of influence between designers and their intended audience.' The

designed object is persuasive when it creates a new vision of social life" (B. and S. Tharp 103). For Malpass, a critical design's "narrative of use"—which involves the incorporation of contextualizing material and external media to accompany the artifact—helps present its rhetorical function (47). Because *Prometheus* is a game, not an abstract artifact, the "object and contextualizing material" are therefore interwoven (Malpass 47). The player must engage with the narrative of the game in order to interact holistically with its design. To help understand the coded expression of rhetoric in videogames, Ian Bogost coined the term *procedural rhetoric*: "the practice of effective persuasion and expression using processes… assembling particular rules that suggest a particular function of a particular system" (Bogost 2663). The player's inevitable interaction with the rules of a game shape the effect of the gameplay experience, which can communicate certain messages intentionally or unintentionally. As with any design, then, the game designer has a responsibility to leverage their product's rhetorical possibilities to deliberately reflect desired values. There is an intimacy to the immersion that narrative-driven games require of their players that leave them susceptible to procedural rhetoric. This gives game designers a responsibility to consider the potential messaging their gameplay experiences could have on players. When touching on play's capability to be used for critical or activist purposes, Flanagan draws on Homi Bhabha's notion of "thirdspace" to explain how it allows players to "eschew binary oppositions and allow for the possibility of a subject to be simultaneously in several spatialities" (253). It is precisely by situating players in this liminal position between reality and fiction, person and character, and forcing them to interact within stories about real issues that game design can become a form of critical design.

3.5.6 Conclusions

There are a few reasons why I think a text-based game, like *Prometheus*, is an effective form of design to prompt critical reflection. Firstly, the lack of visuals allows the player to project themselves and their product into the fictional situation. Secondly, the stylistic use of the second-person pronoun ("you") in these games, which semantically addresses the player and their character simultaneously, is an effective way to invoke personal culpability. I want the player to feel that the game is speaking directly to them even as they are aware that they are playing a character. Lastly, as a single-player game, playing *Prometheus* is an isolated experience that I think offers a unique virtual space for quiet reflection in a world filled with social distractions. Regarding my choice of game mechanics, I modified the idea of 'game-overs' common to many games when incorporating the explicitly 'bad' endings to each scenario. The inclusion of these endings ensures that the player receives a degree of negative feedback if they make choices that dismiss the value of thinking critically about design's potential ethical impacts. Otherwise, the game's design could be problematized as being rhetorically agnostic.

Although there are useful distinctions to note between the terms *critical design, discursive design,* and *critical play* that shed light on the multitude of intentions and design methods that can inform a designer's approach to their product, the crucial commonality between these theories is that they all stress the value of a design's ability to communicate to its audience. Each framework calls for alternative forms of design practice that operate outside of a purely commercial and utilitarian problem space to promote critical thinking about the relationship between humans and the designs we are constantly surrounded by.

Moreover, they can be applied to the practice of narrative design for game creators to consider how the expressive storytelling potential of the medium can be leveraged for more direct rhetorical purposes.

Drawing on the same myth that informs the title of my game, Marcel O'Gorman calls the thoughtless drive towards technological progress for its own sake "a Promethean trap" that celebrates humanity's ability to extend itself infinitely through technology without a reflective consideration of how doing so impacts our fellow humans (74). This is the core spirit of alternative design practice which I hope to have exhibited through my game. O'Gorman advocates for the practice of *making media theory* as an antidote to the thoughtless proliferation of technoculture: "a process that involves a feedback loop between reading, writing, and making, [which] generates a nexus of activity suitable for attentively responding and contributing to technological developments" (74). This paper and its integration with the design process of *Prometheus* is an experiment in this very practice. By integrating this research process into the making of *Prometheus,* I have forced myself to reflect critically on the development of a game that itself functions as a critical tool. This slow, reflective, intellectual engagement with the design process helped me remain mindful of how to make my game express its rhetorical intentions effectively to its audience. Aside from working as a potential pedagogical tool, then, I hope this project's reflections can provide a framework for other game creators to synthesize game/narrative design's immersive entertainment with critical design or discursive design's subversive intentions. Any design could benefit from this careful approach to iteration that considers not only how

the product will be used, but how it will impact its users through its inherently rhetorical potential.

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3.6 Paper 5: Iterating a Game Series' Identity: Mixed-Methods Analysis of the Creative Process Developing *Dragon Quest I-VI*

3.6.1 Introduction

Practically speaking, the goal of a videogame studio developing and iterating on a series is to provide a better product with each new entry while reusing assets to simplify the process. While the notion of what makes a game *better* is of course subjective and up to the preferences of individual players, the developer's onus is to understand the appeal of their product and determine what they can add or change between new entries of a series to offer a more robust and compelling iteration of its vision. Such changes might include added/reworked features, technical improvements, smoother gameplay balancing (i.e.

difficulty curves), and a more captivating audiovisual and narrative presentation. Pleasing fan expectations in these ways tends to involve evolution in hardware, design, scope, and aesthetics—which requires more time, money, staff, and creativity. Through clone-and-own practice, developers can prioritize creative design decisions and polish in later entries within a series since they have already established core mechanics and foundational asset development. Yet, despite a developer's best efforts to constantly improve on previous work, the appeal of a game can often be intangible. It depends on what iteration of the design vision—or the fiction-based representation that surround it—happens to resonate with the largest group of players. Our intent with this article is to further understand the creative decisions developers make in trying to iterate towards a better product, touch on the intangible factors that complicate this goal, and consider how individual games come to have unique identities and appeal within the series that contains them.

This paper showcases the methods and results of a collaborative project that applies data regarding hardware limitations (Table 1) as well as asset development and reuse towards a mixed-methods analysis of the first six *Dragon Quest* games: *Dragon Quest* (DQ), *Dragon Quest II (DQ2), Dragon Quest III (DQ3)*, and *Dragon Quest IV (DQ4)* on the Famicom—originally localized as *Dragon Warrior* for the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in the west; and *Dragon Quest V* (*DQ5*) and *Dragon Quest VI* (*DQ6*) on the Super Famicom (SFC), whose original versions were never officially localized for the Super Nintendo (SNES) in the west. Does the new potential afforded by improved hardware affect how the developers of *Dragon Quest I-VI* make creative decisions that iterate on the series? What are these creative, iterative decisions? How do they define the appeal and identity of the individual games? One

hypothesis, based on the industry logic described above, is that the first six *Dragon Quest* games demonstrate *quantifiable* progressive improvements to the series through the inclusion of new assets (mechanics, monsters, maps, text, music) and iteration on a relatively fixed game design. A second, parallel hypothesis, based on player experience, considers that the changes brought on by this pursuit of improvement leads to *qualitative* differences between individual titles that could make an older iteration more appealing than a newer one, or at least meaningfully distinct from it.

Table 1. Cartridge evolution of the original Japanese versions of DQ I-VI.

Game	Console	Release	ROM Capacity
DQ1	FC	1986	64 KB
DQ2	FC	1987	128 KB
DQ3	FC	1988	256 KB
DQ4	FC	1990	512 KB
DQ5	SFC	1992	12 Mb
DQ6	SFC	1995	32 Mb

We decided upon this selection of *Dragon Quest* games as our case study for three main reasons:

1. They are groundbreaking yet understudied role-playing games (RPGs) that are key to defining the Japanese role-playing game (JRPG) sub-genre and are thus historically important.
2. They are steeped in tradition, preferring subtle iteration on a reused formula (including battle system, graphical and user interface aesthetics, recurring monsters) over reinvention. Due to this, there is no tangible reason why the developers shouldn't be able to 'improve' their game design with each new entry.
3. They are classic titles from the third and fourth console generations and thus were developed by small teams with modest, yet constantly evolving, hardware. This makes the relation between each game's creative and technical accomplishments easier to quantify.

This study 'reverse engineers' the development process of a retro game series to better understand the roles of both tangible (quantitative) and intangible (qualitative) iterations in defining the individual and collective identity of the games within said series. This allows us to comment on the difference between improving a game design versus narrative design, which hold similar importance in the development and reception of a good RPG. Another goal of the project is to show how collaborations between Computer Science and Humanities research methods can reveal greater insights into the material factors that inform the creation, significance, and interpretation of videogames as both technical *and* artistic textual objects. We would also like to make our method transparent and reproducible, and our findings accessible, as a way of promoting similar interdisciplinary collaborations in game studies.

We will begin by breaking down our mixed-methods approach in the context of existing, related literature. Afterwards, we will conduct our analysis by bridging the data from our quantitative and qualitative findings across two main links that connect our disciplinary methods: Link 1) Design, Character Portrayals, and Stat Progressions; and Link 2) Asset Representation and Evolution. The analysis demonstrates that the consistently improved hardware (e.g. more read-only memory (ROM), better processing power) available after the release of the original *Dragon Quest* were crucial to the development team realizing a core game design vision that culminates with *DQ3*. Having established this design foundation, iterations in the following three sequels reflect qualitatively shifting priorities alongside consistent quantitative progress. In comparison to the first three games, *DQ4, DQ5,* and *DQ6* stand apart as more distinct experiences not only due to clear aesthetic evolutions enabled by better technology, but purposeful structural differences that distinguish them and break new ground in RPG storytelling and narrative design.

3.6.2 Related Works

There is a relative lack of scholarly research on the *Dragon Quest* series despite its historical importance and continued success. One chapter, by Koyama, notes the series' basis in the design of early western computer RPGs (CRPGs or WRPGs), such as *Wizardry* (1980) and *Ultima* (1980) (20). *Dragon Quest* carved its own identity distinct from its western inspirations through more linear scenarios (influenced by Japanese Adventure games and manga), accessible controls aimed at more casual console audiences, and colorful anime aesthetics (Wada 143). The series' design pillars have remained the same as it has

progressed, with gameplay divided between combat (alongside leveling and stat progression), exploration, and socializing with non-player characters (NPCs). Later games, beginning with *DQ4*, helped distinguish the JRPG sub-genre according to its linear and character-centric approach to videogame storytelling (Koyama 31). We therefore believe that studying these *Dragon Quest* games with our method can reveal historically significant insights into the development realities of the mid-80s to mid-90s in the context of JRPG design and narrative evolution.

Alongside their overall game design, we will be analyzing the *narrative design* of the *Dragon Quest* games. Berger describes narrative design as the creation of a "narrative system," which functions through the construction and framing of triggering criteria for story mechanisms tied to the game design. This requires the skills of:

> (1) a pure designer to establish the in-game, non-narrative criteria (e.g., achievements, unlocks, collections, progression in the environment) for the triggering; (2) a writer or narrative designer to segment which part of the story to reveal at a given time and to write the content per each segment; and (3) a software engineer to create the programming logic to actualize the triggers and content in game. (Berger 24-25)

Our analysis unveils the creative dynamics behind this interpersonal, interdisciplinary authoring process. As opposed to the story writer of a novel or screenplay, a narrative designer's creativity is limited by material factors that determine what ideas can be implemented. This is an especially important point to note when studying retro videogames, which require developers to frequently cut ambitious ideas in favor of prioritizing a functional product ("Dragon Quest IV"). This interdisciplinary work builds on the imperative

put forth by Aycock and Finn for computer science and humanities researchers to complement each other's skillsets. They suggest that "it is only through engaging [technical] limitations that play is possible" because the "aesthetics of games lies somewhere between the material and immaterial worlds of hardware, software, and creative composition" (Aycock and Finn). The study will therefore offer a clearer lens on the sorts of restraints Horii and his team had to deal with in developing the games with a mutually supportive game system and narrative system.

Furthermore, the project combines Nooney's approach to game history research as a "speleology" that embraces "human specificity" and an "inability to apprehend the historical field in its wholeness" with standard media archaeology. Bridging this divide is a natural consequence of our mixed-methods approach. Archaeological methods privilege exacting results in what they dig up, which we pursue in our quantitative analysis, while our qualitative component applies these results towards textual analyses that attempt to understand the development team's process. Nooney notes how "the Internet overflows with game history" across "a wide range of independent and institutional preservation initiatives". In the absence of 'official' alternatives, we primarily lift our data from these fan-curated efforts towards an analysis intended to unravel the development realities and textual nuances of a historically significant game series.

The novelty of our approach and underrepresentation of our case studies means that there is little directly related literature to build from. However, Patrick Holleman's *Reverse Design* book series, which conducts readings of classic videogames by synthesizing player

experience with quantitative game data, provides a constructive precedent for the type of data-informed game analysis we engage in.

3.6.3 Methodology

3.6.3.1 Quantitative Method

Obtaining numeric data for *Dragon Quest I–VI* is challenging because Square Enix never released a unified, machine-readable archive. We therefore turned to grey literature—fan wikis, scanned strategy guides, map archives, speed-runner forums, and hardware databases—each holding only part of the puzzle. By April 2025 we had snapshotted seven key sources: official manuals and guides (where available); *Woodus Den*, *Dragon Quest Wiki*, and *Dragon-Quest.org* for stats; *IGDB* for release metadata; *Realm of Darkness* for map grids; Nayukaaaaa's script dumps for dialogue; *NESCartDB* and *SNESCentral* for ROM details; and *GameFAQs* threads for edge-case mechanics.

A semi-autonomous Python pipeline pulled tables from web pages and read scanned images and PDFs. After normalising labels, we exported CSVs, ran basic sanity checks, and merged regional duplicates. These cleaned files form the dataset used in our analysis. One author replayed each game, capturing screens and logs to spot-check values; discrepancies were discussed before a final inclusion. All the data is available on Zenodo (doi: 10.5281/zenodo.15579078).

Table 2. Sources used for the paper's data.

Source	Purpose	Links

Official manuals & strategy guides	Ground-truth rules, wording	• Prima's Official Strategy Guide • BradyGames Official Strategy Guides
Fan / wiki repositories	Attributes, enemy stats, item lists	• https://www.woodus.com/ • https://dragonquest.fandom.com/ • https://dragon-quest.org/
Gameplay database	Release metadata, completion times	• https://www.igdb.com/
Map archive	Exact tile layouts, pixel size	• https://www.realmofdarkness.net/dq/games/
Script dump archive	Narrative text, word counts	• https://nayukaaaaa.nomaki.jp/wp/
Hardware databases	ROM sizes, PCB revisions	• https://nescartdb.com/ · https://snescentral.com/gameslist.php
Community forums	Edge-case mechanics, expert insight	• https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/

3.6.3.2 Qualitative Method

The qualitative research for this project involved investigating the development histories and formal design shifts of the first six *Dragon Quest* games and critically playing their original versions. In accordance with Fernandez-Vara's book on game analysis, we fuse understandings of game genre, technological context, and socio-historical background of our case studies with quantitative data to provide a thematic analysis on the connections between series iteration and the individual games' identity (13). This analysis is supported by

extensive engagement with paratexts and our quantitative data. A paratext, for the purpose of game analysis, involves any material packaged with the game itself, the hardware the game is played on, and contemporary material informing players' perception of the game (Fernandez-Vara 6-7). For example, we consulted each game's credits on *Mobygames* to make note of changes and consistencies in the development teams as well as translated interviews from original staff. We also looked at scans of game reviews from old magazines using the *Video Game History Foundation* Library's digitized catalog to gain a better understanding of critical reception of the series in the west. All this information helped form a more complete understanding of each game and the series as a whole, but only select relevant data was focused on for this paper's thematic analysis of the games.

While playing, we used analytical memoing to take notes on the unique qualities and overall evolution of each game, organized into four categories described below**.** These categories are based around the core game design pillars of the JRPG genre: combat, exploration, and narrative, with consideration of the assets that support these pillars. Each category lumped together the following observations on the game's formal properties:

- **Combat and Progression** relates to, for example, how much damage player characters and enemies inflict, how much gold and experience is rewarded from battles, how easy/difficult it is to become stronger through purchasing equipment or leveling, and how rewarding this balance feels to the player.
- **Exploration and World Design** relates to, for example, the overall structure of the game, conditions for game progression, and level/map design, with consideration of

how challenging, smooth, or tedious interacting with and progressing in the game world is.

- **Story and Narrative Design** relates to, for example, the framing of gameplay through narrative detail, the complexity of the plot and characterizations, and the overall study of how much effort and resources were dedicated to adding personality into the game beyond pure function.
- **Assets** involve, for example, documenting the quantity, detail, and function of text, sprites (including NPCs and monsters), locations (from individual places to the overworld), animations, and music/sound.

The divisions between these categories were not always clear-cut, which underscores each of their importance in holistically describing the identity of a game. Together, the notes provide crucial context for understanding how *Dragon Quest's* developers chose to iterate different aspects of each new game. Importantly, it also allows us to understand what makes each game stand apart with an identity of its own.

3.6.4 Results/Analysis

We have divided the analysis into two main sections with subsections organized to reflect the overarching results. The first section analyzes the evolution of the first three *Dragon Quest* games (together known as the Erdrick Trilogy), which showcase a clear progression in terms of the small yet notable leaps that gradually improved hardware allowed. This core game design is fulfilled in *DQ3*, which offers both a more strategically robust and narratively satisfying progression than its predecessors. The three subsections describe the most notable

changes in each game, demonstrating a mostly linear progression in improving on the fundamental design vision. The second section analyzes the more experimental evolution of *DQ4*, *DQ5*, and *DQ6* (together known as the Zenithia Trilogy), with consideration of how the quantitative and qualitative changes between games made each title experientially distinct. Unlike *DQ 1-4*, which all appear similar on a surface level due to the constraints of the NES, *DQ5* and *DQ6* are evidently more detailed in terms of their audiovisual presentation. Additionally, the differences in narrative design, game balance, and pacing across the Zenithia Trilogy demonstrate shifting ambitions and priorities within the bounds of the series' established core game design. These differences will be explored laterally, with sub-sections divided based on the quantitative datasets we prepared to inform the analysis.

3.6.4.1 Developing a Design Vision: The Erdrick Trilogy (*Dragon Quest I-III*)

3.6.4.1.1 Dragon Quest

In the original *DQ*, the solo player character is assigned a quest by the King of Alefgard to save his princess daughter, defeat the evil Dragonlord, and thereby follow in the footsteps of the legendary hero, Erdrick. With no backstory and no companions, *DQ's* Hero is simply a blank slate who can purchase weapons and learn magic to dispose of monsters and complete his quest. *DQ* is a simple experience built upon significantly in subsequent games, but aspects of it are unique (Table 3). It is a rare case of a JRPG with a solo hero. The 1 vs 1 style of combat is a limitation of its 32kb ROM capacity and restrains strategic variety, but there is some appeal behind the simple risk/reward assessment a player must calculate measuring the complete knowledge of their character's stats against the incomplete

knowledge of the enemy's. Notably, the limited scope of combat means that the developers were able to include a battle background when fighting enemies in the overworld. Every subsequent game on the NES would only feature black backgrounds due to the memory requirements of featuring more monsters (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Battle screens in DQ, DQ2, and DQ3 (clockwise).



Table 3. Evolution of battle features in the Erdrick Trilogy.

Feature	DQ1	DQ2	DQ3
Max active party	1	3 (fixed)	4 (custom)

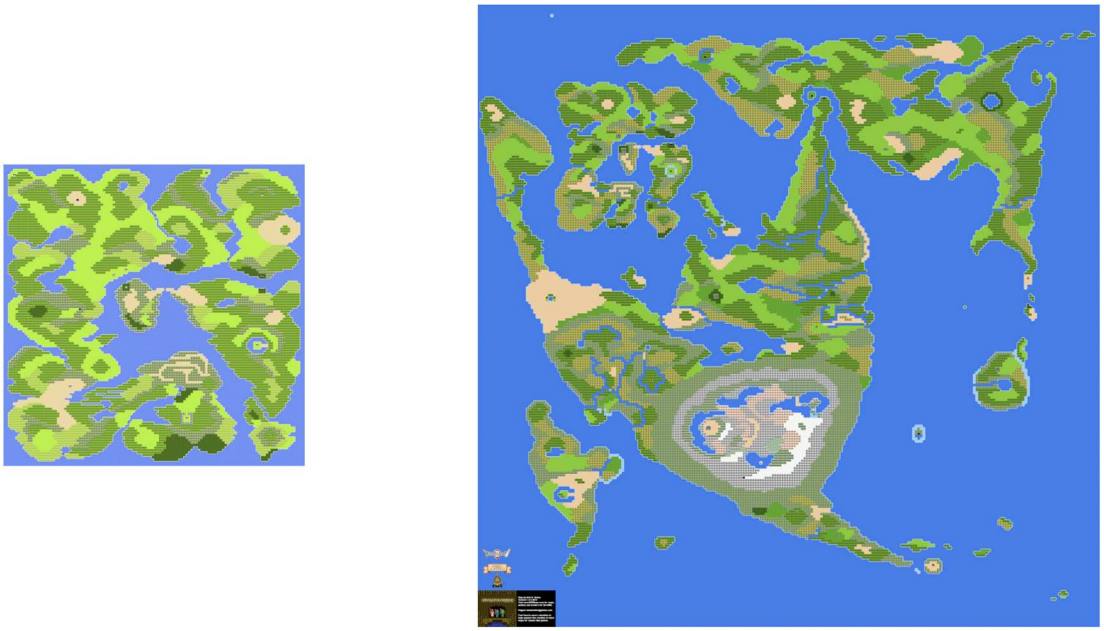
Custom classes / respec	—	—	Yes (class change)
Enemies	Introduced: 40 Reused: —	Introduced: 78 Reused: 4	Introduced: 132 Reused: 17
Enemy formation size	1	≤ 8, grouped	≤ 8, grouped
Targeting types	Single	Single · Group	Single · Group · All
Skills/Spells	Introduced: 10 Reused: —	Introduced: 15 Reused: 7	Introduced: 39 Reused: 21
Status variety	Introduced: 2 Reused: —	Introduced: 2 Reused: 2	Introduced: 1 Reused: 4

The smaller scope of the game space also allows for more open-ended exploration in its design. Unlike each of its sequels, there are no hard locks on progression throughout its world. Every area of the game is accessible from the very beginning, with monster difficulty across different regions being the only deterrent from doing so. The only exception is the Isle of Dragons—a small area containing the game's final dungeon—which the player must first discover three key items to unlock access to. *Dragon Quest's* structure thus requires the player to explore the world and talk to NPCs until they can discern the locations of these three key items—the ancient relics of Erdrick and his companions. NPC dialogue is mostly used to communicate information about how to play the game effectively or hints about where to find key items necessary to progress.

3.6.4.1.2 Dragon Quest II

In *DQ2*, the player slowly assembles a party of three characters who are all descendants of the first game's hero: the Prince of Midenhall (PoMD), the Prince of Cannock (PoC), and the Princess of Moonbrook (PoMB). It thus expands on the original game's turn-based gameplay with team-based combat between a group of heroes (up to 3) and group of monsters (up to 8), which results in more strategic variation. Yet, the time the developers spent focusing on expanding these elements meant that they left themselves far less time to effectively balance the game ("Dragon Quest II").

Figure 13. DQ and DQ2 overworld proportions. Note how a shrunken replication of DQ's overworld is contained in the top-left of DQ2's overworld.



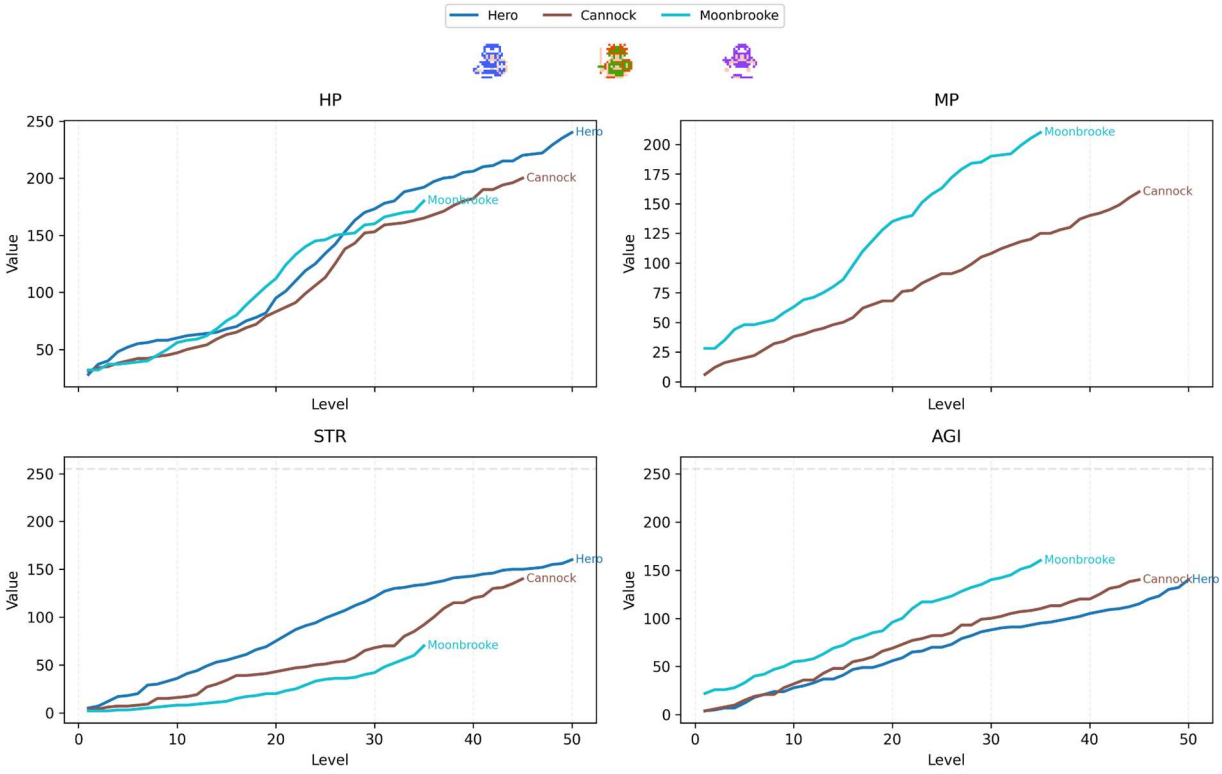
The overworld is around 6x larger than *DQ's* and there are over double the locations to visit (Figure 25). However, this ratio means that there is much more empty space to get lost in, which for some players might lead to a greater sense of exploration and discovery

while others might find it tedious. So, despite *DQ2* being a much more ambitious title, offering extended playtime and more strategic combat, there are some trade-offs in balancing and presentation. Although the three playable characters are not substantially defined through dialogue, they are characterized by their distinct in-game appearances and mechanical skillsets (Figure 15). The PoMD is by far the strongest and most resilient fighter but cannot cast spells; meanwhile, the PoC's stats are balanced between physical strength and magic, while the PoMB cannot deal much physical damage and therefore serves more of a support role in addition to learning a few offensive spells (Figure 15). Finally, PoC and PoMB receive some characterization through NPCs and events surrounding them. PoC has a brash sister who demands that the PoMD ensure her brother's safety (Figure 14). PoMB is defined through the tragedy that occurs to her home in the cinematic opening cutscene (Figure 14) as well as the quest to cure her curse when you first encounter her. While *DQ2's* ambition leads to some flaws in its gameplay, its scope and narrative presentation is a significant leap from its predecessor.

Figure 14. PoC's sister (left) and PoMB's backstory (right) adds a new level of characterization to the series' playable characters.



Figure 15. DQ2 characters' stat progression.



3.6.4.1.3 Dragon Quest III

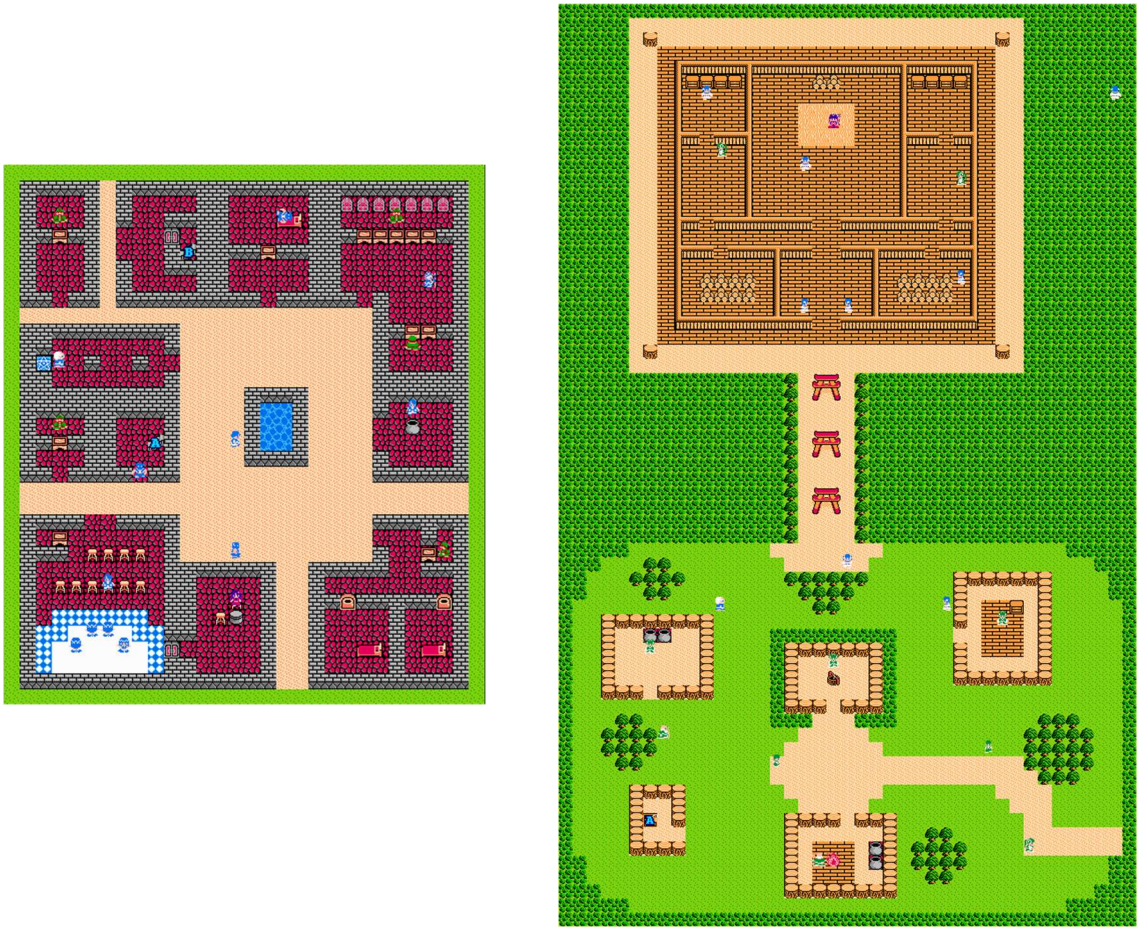
DQ3 offers a significant refinement of the series' evolving design. Intended by the developers as a more hardcore RPG experience and with more development time than its predecessor for refinement, the game's structure and systems allow for a strategically robust experience from the outset ("Dragon Quest III"). As a prequel to the last two games, the player embodies the 16-year-old Hero who will eventually become known as Erdrick. The Hero is prompted by the King to recruit a party of companions on their quest to save the world from the Demon Lord Baramos and potentially find their father, Ortega, who has gone missing during his attempt to find and kill Baramos. Instead of meeting new characters intertwined with the story, as in *DQ2,* the player can immediately recruit three companions from the Hero's hometown tavern. These characters can be selected from a set of 6 potential vocation options with different stat distributions and skillsets: Soldier, Fighter, Priest (originally localized as Pilgrim), Wizard, Merchant, and Goof-off. Before even entering a battle, players are encouraged to think carefully about how they build their team for an effective balance of abilities. These characters are nameable by the player but are not integrated into the story on any level.

Despite the fact that *DQ3*'s companions have less characterization than those of its predecessor, the Hero, the world, and its NPCs all have more detailed narrative intrigue. The Hero is depicted with a family life and the framing is that of a coming-of-age story. Most significantly, the game's towns feature more NPCs, whose dialogue now sometimes express personality and humor instead of the almost exclusive focus on tutorialization in previous

games. This is taken further with the introduction of a day/night cycle, as each town and its NPCs are shown in two different states with different dialogues. This gives a stronger impression of the game taking place in a living world with people in it, rather than a mere setting for gameplay.

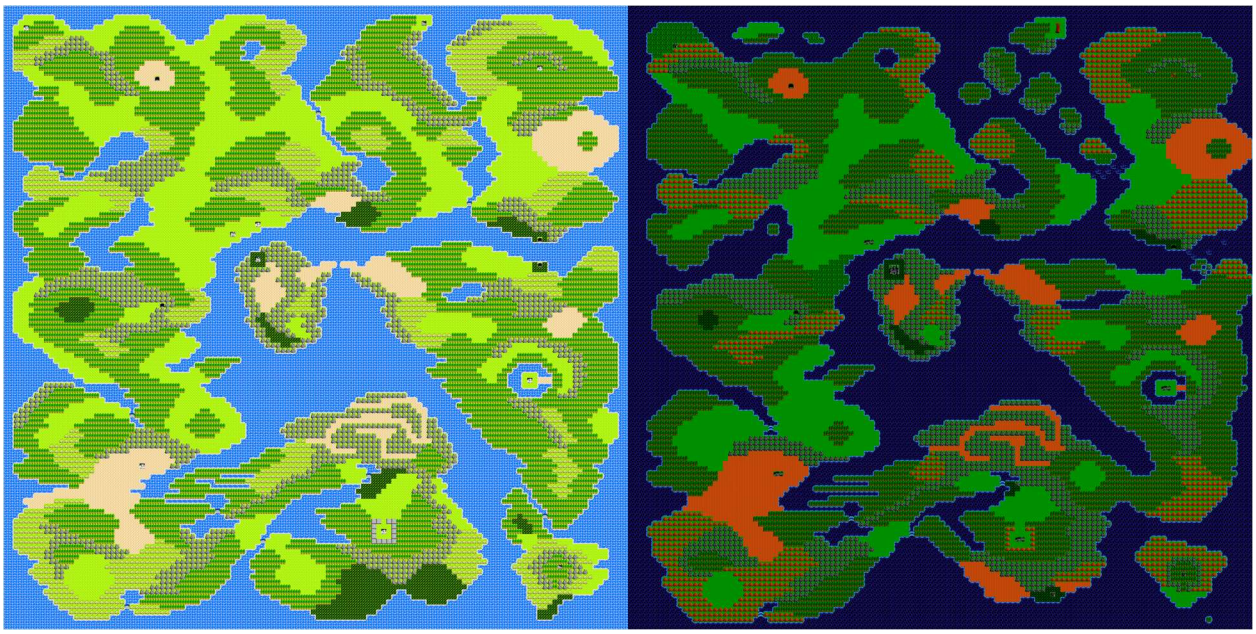
As another way of further characterizing the world and its individual locations, most towns now have a general conflict surrounding them and some are based on real-world locations. While progression is still tied to finding MacGuffins, it is better contextualized in terms of solving local conflicts in each of the game's culturally distinct towns. Major towns include, for example, Assaram, which features a new desert tileset and contains a bazaar where the player can haggle for the price of items; and Jipang, which evokes feudal Japan with a new wood building tileset for its houses and red torii gates leading up to a shrine (Figure 16).

Figure 16. DQ3's Assaram (left) and Jipang (right).



In sum, *DQ3* uses its doubled ROM size (256kb) in comparison to *DQ2* to develop the series' combat system through greater strategic and customization options, as well as inject more personality into its world. The overworld is not significantly larger than its predecessor, but there are far more locations to discover as opposed to empty space to get lost in. There is also a second overworld the player can access near the end of the game, which is a shrunken facsimile of the original *DQ's* overworld used to complete the narrative continuity of the Erdrick Trilogy (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Alefgard in DQ (left) and DQ3 (right)



3.6.4.2 Iterating Identity: The Zenithia Trilogy (Dragon Quest IV-VI)

Dragon Quest IV, V, and *VI* depart from the legacy of Erdrick to establish a new loose trilogy. There is greater variation in the structure, narrative design, audiovisual presentation, and core game mechanics of these titles than their predecessors, although they are ultimately iterations on the core game design established in the Erdrick Trilogy (Table 4). Each game therefore distinguishes itself through subtle iteration of the game design solidified throughout the Erdrick Trilogy, exercising creativity within the bounds of tradition. The discussion will be explored laterally, structured around each of our key datasets. While the Erdrick Trilogy's iterations led to an easily quantifiable progression in the vision behind the series, the variations in the Zenithia Trilogy are bound to be more subjective in terms of players' perceived impact on the games' appeal.

Table 4. Differences in game mechanics across the Zenithia Trilogy.

Mechanic	Zenithia Trilogy		
	DQ4	**DQ5**	**DQ6**
Party system	Yes (4)	Yes(3)	Yes(4)
Class customization / jobs	No	No	Yes
Monster recruitment	No	Yes	Yes (basic)
AI party control / tactics	Yes (mandatory)	Yes	Yes
Day-night cycle	Yes	Yes	No
Character-driven narrative	Yes	Yes	Yes
Vocation / skill-mastery system	No	No	Yes (advanced)

3.6.4.2.1 Link 1: Design, Character Development, and Progression

Companion and NPC characterization take a higher priority throughout the Zenithia Trilogy than in the first three games. This can be observed not only in the writing of said characters, but in the way that the developers reflect their personalities in stats and abilities. In an interview following the development of *DQ4*, Horii notes that the focus in the previous games was on how players would progress towards the final goal, while in subsequent games "the human relationships that are interwoven into the main quest are now a large part of the

game's appeal, too" (qtd. in "Dragon Quest IV"). RPGs can use these systems as an additional layer of characterization, and *DQ 4-6* each reflect this in their own ways. Along with the greater quantity of and enhanced assets, which will be discussed further on with Link 2, the focus on characterization and narratively contextualized event triggers for game progression separates the two trilogies as gameplay experiences.

DQ4 marks a creative pivot in the series, with a more distinct focus on characterization and narrative presentation than before. The vocation system that gave *DQ3* a sense of customization is replaced by fixed characters who are each depicted as fleshed-out individuals. At the same time, *DQ4*'s characters are each based on one of the vocations from *DQ3* in terms of their general stat progressions and abilities (Figure 18 and Figure 19). For example, the princess Alena is adapted from the Fighter class; the merchant Torneko is adapted from the Merchant class; the characters Cristo and Nara are both adapted from the Pilgrim class, etc.

Figure 18. DQ3 characters' stat progression.

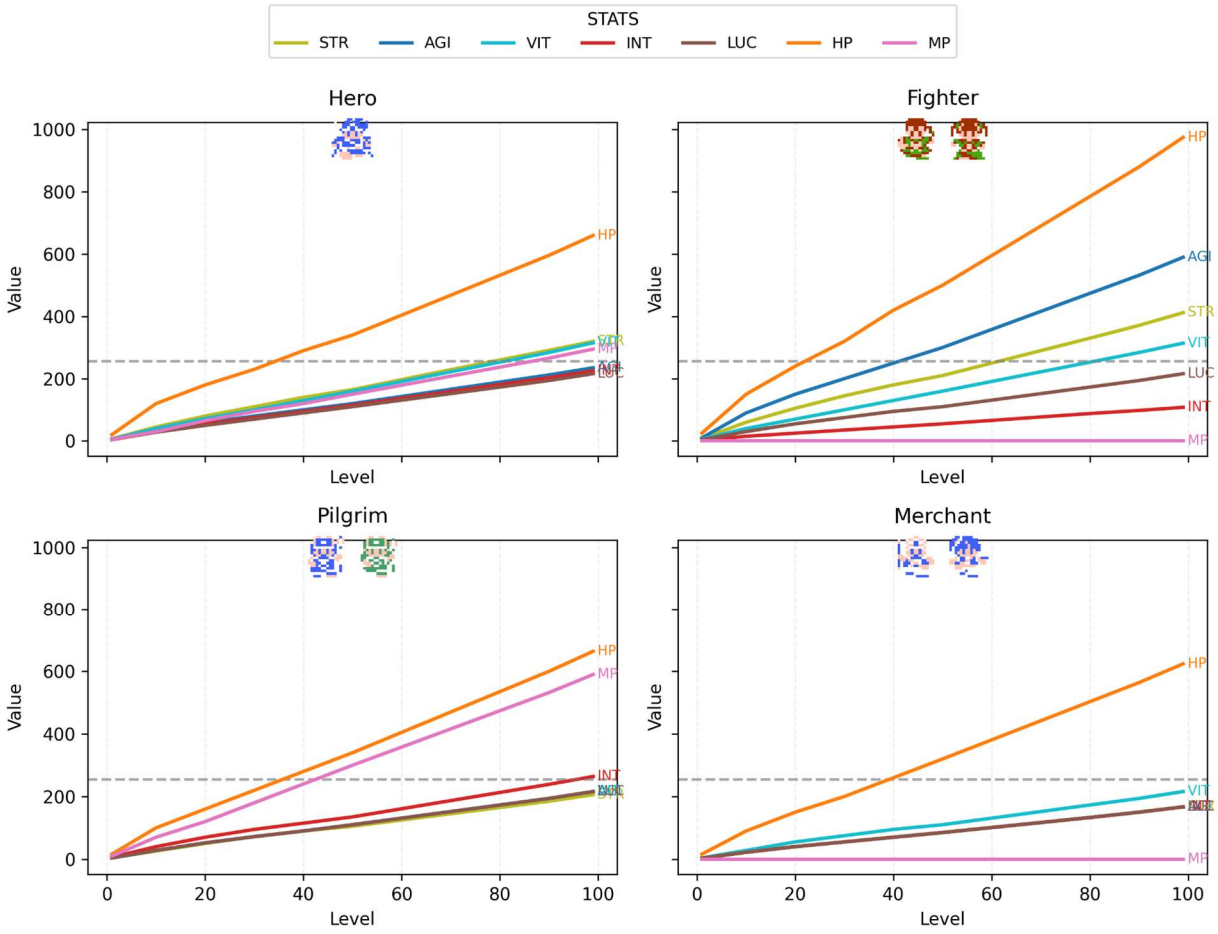
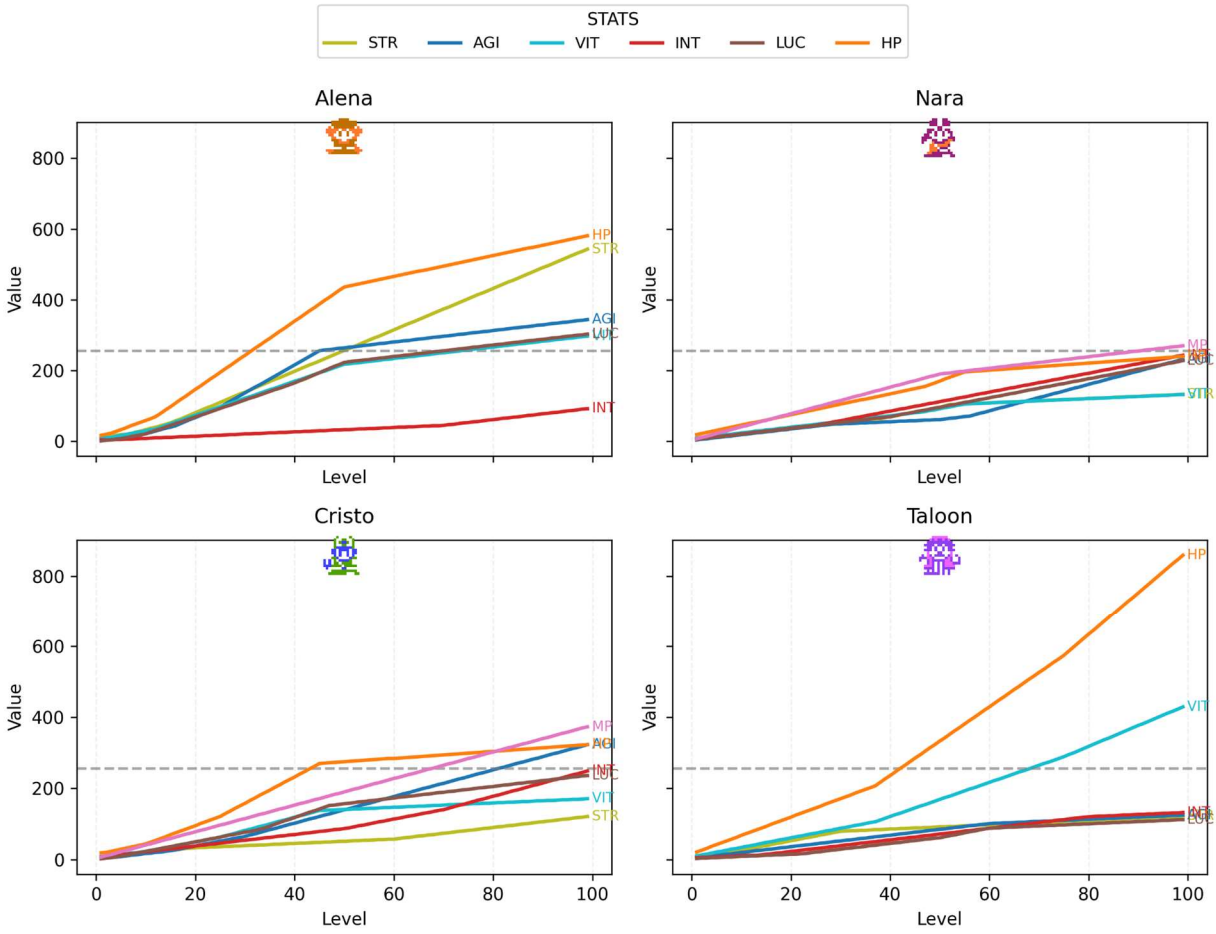


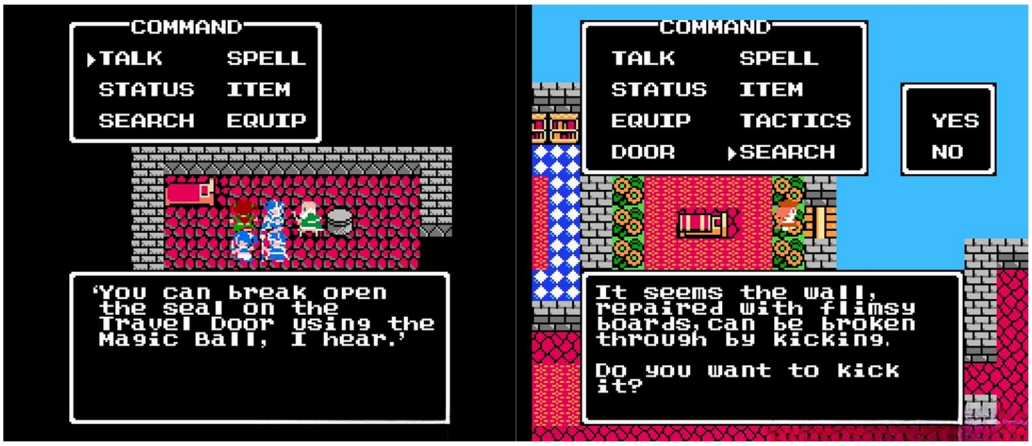
Figure 19. DQ4 characters' stat progression.



Most uniquely, *DQ4* is divided into five chapters that each tell a story around one or more of the game's companions. The player does not even take control of the standard Hero protagonist until the final chapter, instead getting to know the backstories of these 'secondary' companions. A crucial difference in the structure of these chapters compared to previous games is how event triggers for progression let players participate in the characters' developing stories. In Chapter 2, for example, the princess Alena is holed up in her father's

castle as she is obligated to as royalty. The player can wander the castle as Alena and talk to NPCs who remark on her ill-mannered nature and evident desire to escape in favor of adventure. To progress, the player must 'Search' a boarded-up wall in Alena's bedroom, which she destroys (again, supposedly) to begin her escape. Alena's physical prowess is reflected in her high Strength and Agility stat progression that makes her character a playful subversion of both *DQ3's* Fighter vocation, ludically, and the standard videogame princess trope, narratively. In Chapter 3, the merchant Torneko is portrayed as an everyman who the player first embodies by working his day job. A daily cycle begins where the player must walk across the village from Torneko's family home to the Weapon Shop, go behind the counter, and sell equipment to visitors while making profit. The player must continue this until Torneko makes enough money to embark on a quest to begin his own business. As the most ordinary character in the cast, Torneko is deliberately the least functional party member. He is resilient with high HP and Vitality but is otherwise subpar in other stats compared to the rest of the cast.

Figure 20. A MacGuffin-based triggering criteria in DQ3 (on the left) versus a narrative-based triggering criteria in DQ4 (on the right).



DQ5 foregoes typical class archetypes in favor of unique yet more homogenous stat and ability distributions for its characters. While *DQ3's* vocations and *DQ4's* characters are more specialized in terms of physical damage vs offensive magic vs support magic, etc., *DQ5's* characters tend to be more balanced across these specialties. Perhaps this is so players will be even less motivated to choose their party based on gameplay preferences and free to choose based on narrative investment. While *DQ4's* cast spanned its world's cultures and regions, *DQ5's* is more intimately comprised of a growing family and its allies. The game is structured into three generations, following the protagonist's growth from child, to adolescent, to adult. During Act 1, the player controls a child version of the Hero protagonist travelling alongside his father, Papas. The player cannot directly control Papas and he does not level up, which serves to make him feel like a protector rather than a play piece. We can feel his power and high level from the battles we fight alongside him, and he is Level 27 from the outset with unusually high HP, making him feel even more impressive (Figure 21).

At the end of Act 1, Papas dies in a battle trying to protect his son and the young prince Henry from slavers. Characters like Papas and Henry have incomplete curves, as in they begin and/or end at particular levels rather than the usual Level 1-100. This is because they come and go according to the movements of the narrative, conceived as characters within a story and not just play pieces.

Figure 21. DQ5 characters' stat progression.

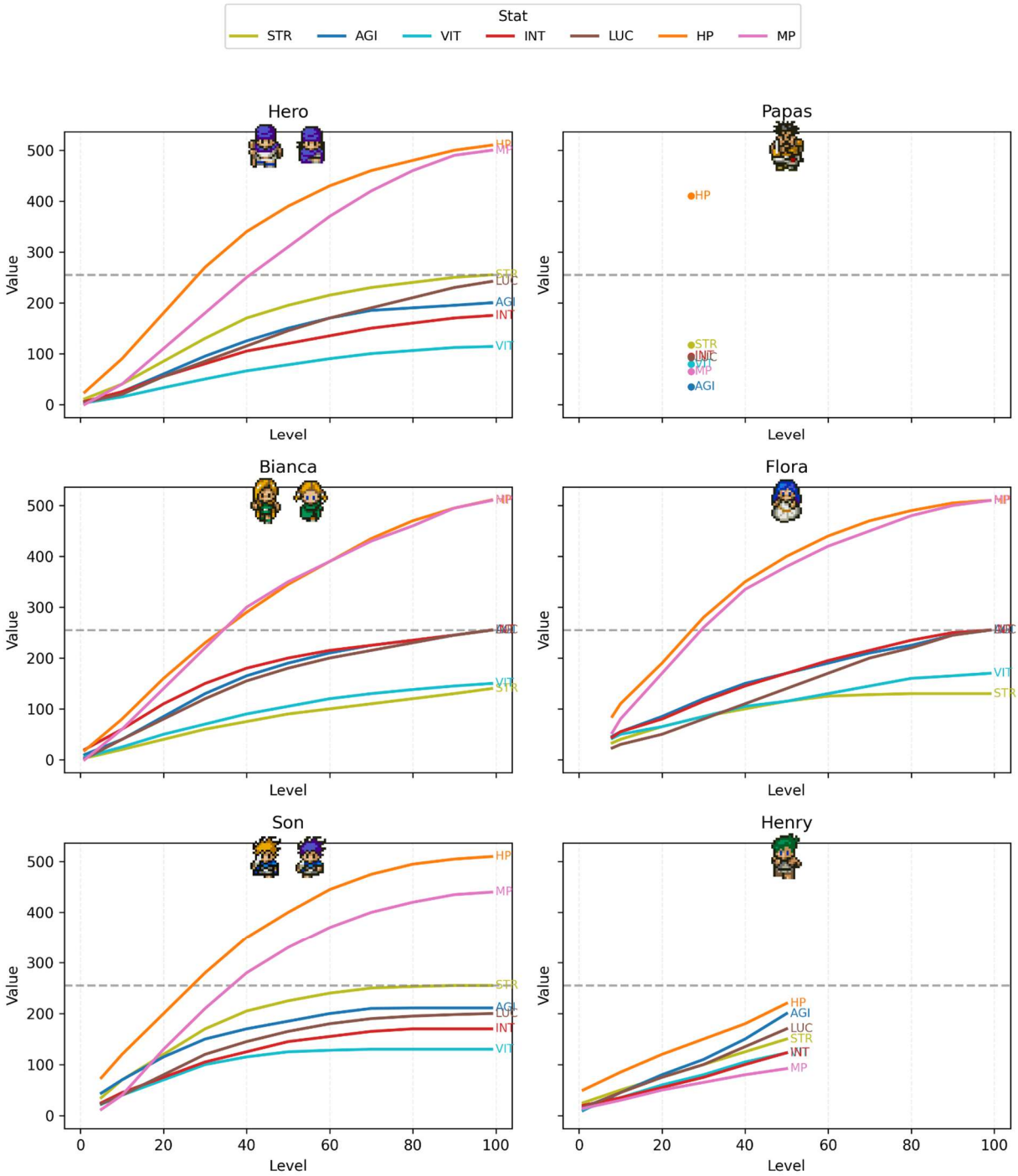


Figure 22. Moments from DQ5 showing how the game contextualizes its gameplay with narrative detail.



At the beginning of Act 2, the Hero must find a way to escape slavery with Henry as the two try to reclaim a place in the world (Figure 22). In the first part of the act, the Hero travels with Henry, who is proficient in physical and magical attacks much like the Hero. In our stat plots, Henry is shown to be weaker than the Hero in all fronts, so he works as a foil to make our character's own strength stand out. A crucial section in Act 2 culminates in choosing a wife to marry, who then becomes a companion. One option is Bianca, a childhood friend first introduced in Act 1. Like the Hero, her stat progression is fairly balanced, yet she

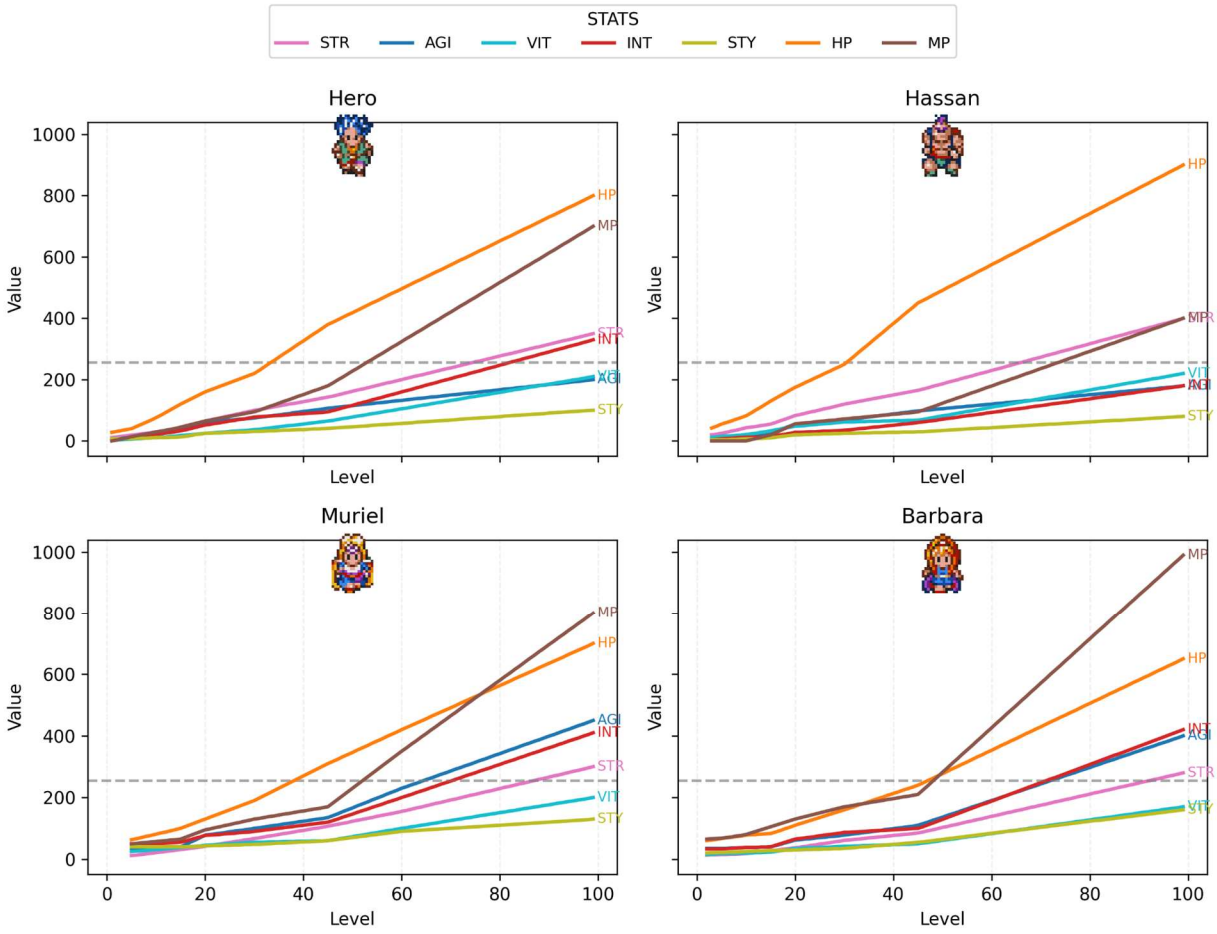
has a steeper stat curve in everything but Strength and HP. The other marriage candidate is Flora, who is less capable in physical stats like Strength and HP but excels in magic with steeper curves for Intelligence and MP. These stat differences are also meant to reflect contrasts in their personalities, as Bianca is portrayed as a tomboy while Flora is meek and doting.

By Act 3, the protagonist and his chosen bride have two children, a nameable Son and Daughter, who also become available as party members. The Son is revealed to be the true Hero of the game and, unlike the protagonist, is able to equip the legendary equipment that only the protagonist of all previous Dragon Quest games can use. The Son's exceptionality is also highlighted in his stat progression, which is similar to the protagonist but slightly superior in every way other than Luck and MP (Figure 20).

DQ6's main premise is how the setting is split between two parallel worlds. Narratively, the game is less focused on its characters than either *DQ4* or *DQ5* while returning to the flexible progression of *DQ3* through a more developed variation of the vocation system. Instead of the game's companions being fully established via vocations, they have unique, personalized stat distributions and skillsets that can then be modified by assigning vocations. Horii himself noted that the game is meant to be a culmination of all its predecessors ("Dragon Quest VI"). Yet, for what is gained in the return to non-linear exploration from *DQ2* or the customization of *DQ3*, the characters are less clearly defined and integrated into the story than in its two immediate predecessors. These companions have set backgrounds, personalities, and stats to support them, yet few of the game's quests provide much character development. Players are incentivized to consider which vocations

best synergize with the base stats of the characters, offering a balance between personalization and customization.

Figure 23. DQ6 characters' stat progression



3.6.4.2.2 Link 2: Asset Representation and Evolution

One of the most common ways that developers advertise sequels is by promising *more*, often through longer playtime (Figure 24), a larger game world (Figure 25), and added gameplay options (Table 2 & Table 4). Our data on the games' map sizes—gathered by

comparing the pixel area across each game's overworld(s) and individual locations—shows quantitative increments across almost each game. The progress across the Erdrick Trilogy, as well as the move from *DQ5* to *DQ6*, show predictable leaps in world size. The only exception is between *DQ3* and *DQ4*, which actually shows a slight decrease in overall map sizes and playtime. Although *DQ4* has double the ROM size of *DQ3*, it was apparently used for other purposes, such as featuring almost double the text (Table 5), 51 more monsters, and introducing a technically innovative AI system for companions (Miyake and Sataka 7). Again, the evolution between *DQ3* and *DQ4* stands as more qualitatively nuanced than the clear quantitative increments in what came before.

Figure 24. Average playtimes to finish each Dragon Quest game.
Main Story (main): complete the main objectives, just enough to see the credits roll. **Main Story and Quests/Medals/Unlockables (*extra*)**: discover and complete additional tasks not required. **Completionist or 100% (*completionist*)**: complete all of what the game has to offer. **Combined (*allstyles*)**: average of all playstyles considered during estimation.

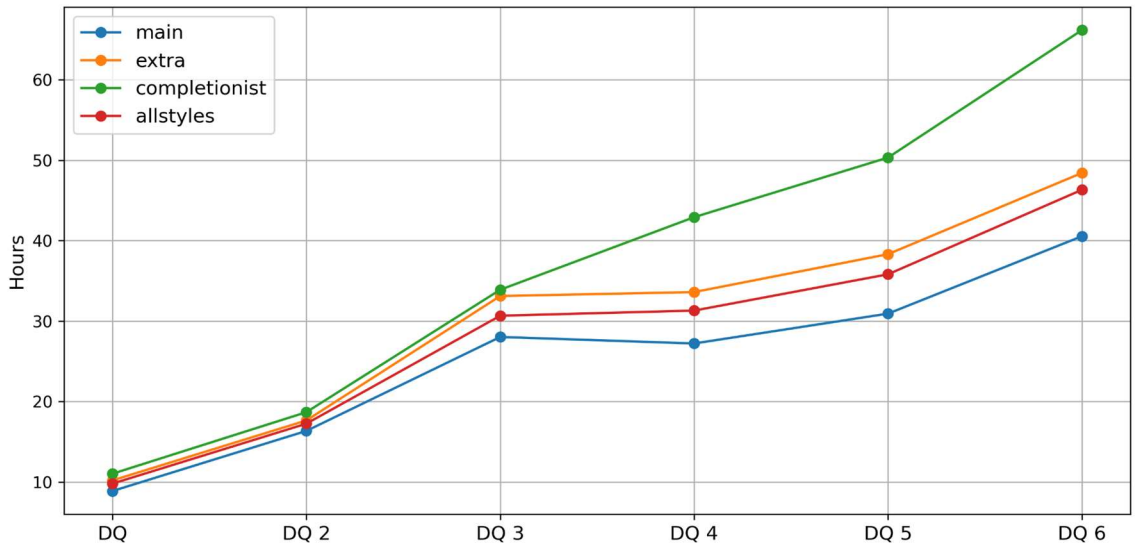


Figure 25. Map sizes per game.

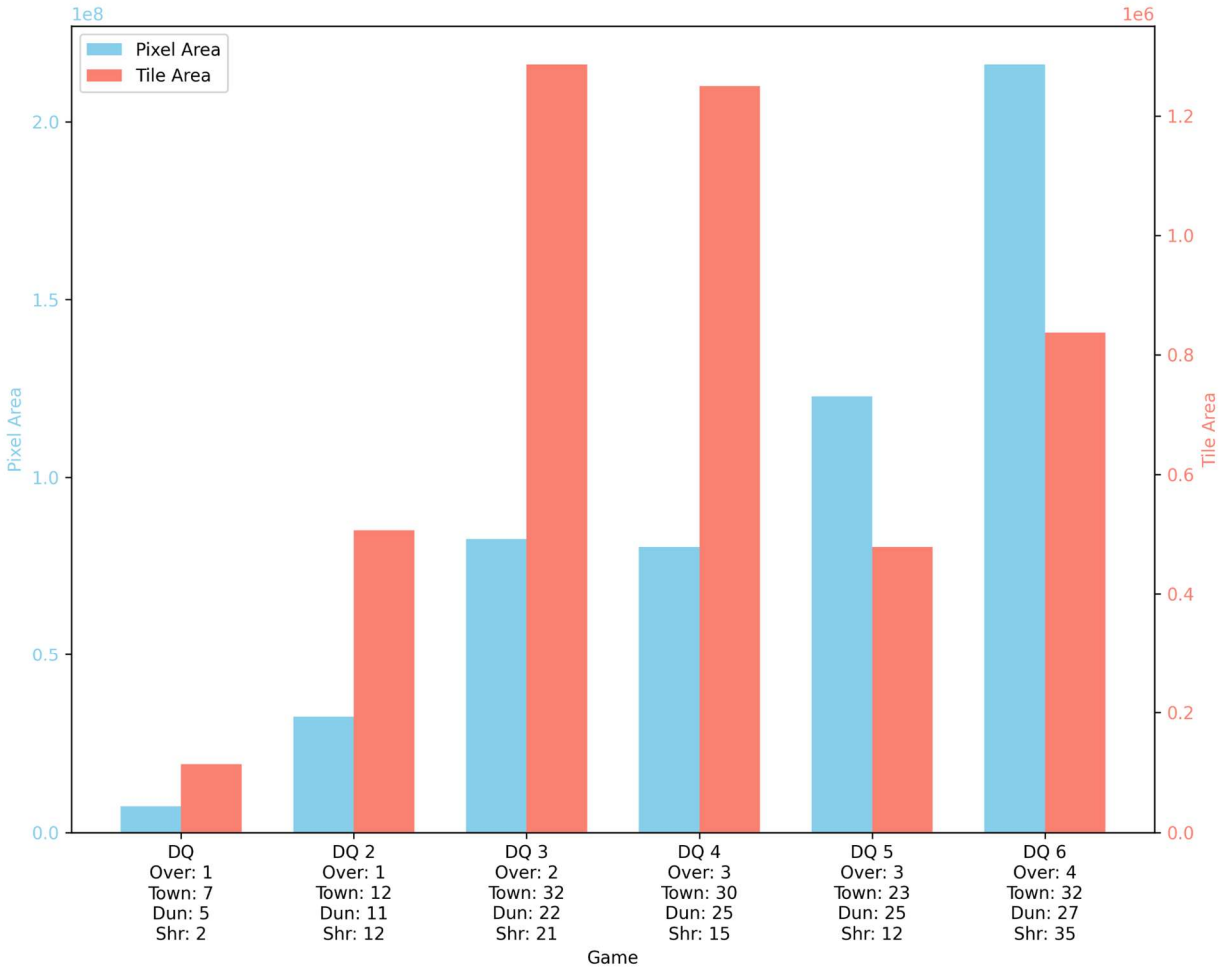
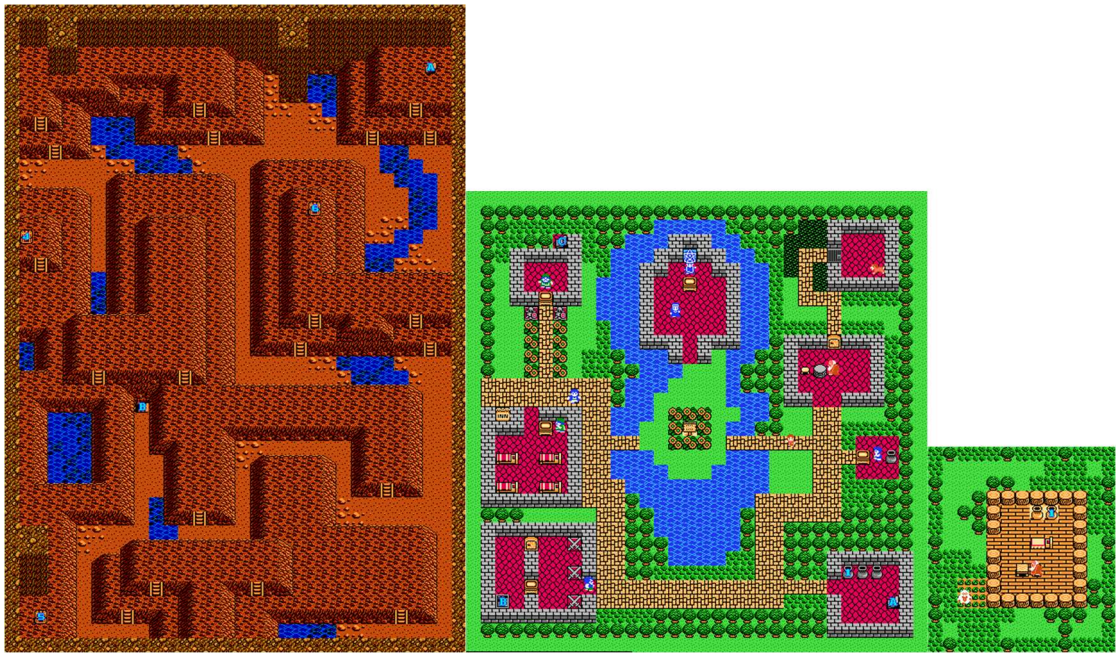


Figure 26. DQ4 locations: (left to right) Gardenbur Cave, Town of Lakanaba, and Shrine Oldmans Island House.



The characterization of locations in the *Dragon Quest* games' worlds is dependent on the variety of tilesets the developers are able to fit on the cartridge. The NES *Dragon Quest* games have limited color palettes, making it difficult to visually distinguish many towns and dungeons. *DQ* only has cave dungeons and towns with stone houses. *DQ2* introduces tower dungeons and a snowy tileset used to distinguish the game's climactic final region. *DQ3* gets even more creative with individual areas, such as a wood building tileset, a desert tileset, and an ice tileset. Since DQ3's world is meant to reflect different regions and cultures based on Earth, this greater variety in tilesets was an essential part of its innovative worldbuilding.

Figure 27. DQ5 and DQ6 locations: (clockwise) Lenoire Castle, Lifecod, Murdaw's Castle (in cutscene).



The SFC games use their hardware's capabilities to distinguish locations even further. This allows for some dungeons that are more narratively contextualized than before. For instance, the first dungeon in *DQ5*, Lenoire Castle, is an old, haunted house with a history

that the player uncovers while progressing (Figure 27). While proceeding, many narrative event triggers occur meant to spook players, such as flashes of lightning and a room of dancing skeletons. Lenoire Castle is more than a gameplay challenge—it is a dungeon that provides a story to play through. Similarly, *DQ6's* first town, Lifecod, is set atop a mountain and contains dynamic narrative events that make it feel memorable. The hardware allows for a greater sense of image depth through background layers, transparency, and scrolling for the developers to apply to more interesting locations and events ("Shigeru Miyamoto"). For example, players can get a sense of the height of Lifecod by seeing the sky and forests in the background layer of the area (Figure 26). To make players feel attached to this starting town, the introduction segment culminates with a festival where the town's NPCs dance around a fire. This segment makes Lifecod feel more dynamically alive than was possible in previous games.

The overall playtime of each game shows similar increments in map sizes (Figure 24). This data is especially interesting when considering pixel area alongside game length. A greater pixel area and number of locations to explore logically correlates with extended playtime. The leaps in the data between the Erdrick Trilogy games, and later *DQ6*, make this the most evident. The most interesting discrepancy is with *DQ5* which, despite showing a leap in pixel area, features approximately 1/3 fewer towns than either of its predecessors. This apparent quantitative downgrade is mitigated by some of the uniqueness of the towns in comparison to *DQ3* or *DQ4*, as discussed above. However, it is also because *DQ5's* generational structure means that players revisit towns at different stages of the protagonist's life, resulting in changes to its narrative relevance and the lives of its NPCs. Backtracking is

thus creatively contextualized in the way the game tells its multi-act story. Similarly, *DQ6* appears to have the same number of towns as *DQ3* and *DQ4*, but its parallel world structure means that many of its towns exist in two forms in narratively distinct states. Thus, while the player may be revisiting what appears to be the same place, its NPCs and questlines (if relevant) will differ or connect. This structure also allows the developers to creatively reuse the same town assets to offer more content that adheres to the narrative premise and themes.

This creative reuse of game space across the Zenithia Trilogy is supported by the inclusion of significantly more text. In contrast to the heavy focus on hint-giving in the Erdrick Trilogy's text, with *DQ4* Horii decided to focus more heavily on depicting NPCs as "living their own life, with their own personal drama" ("Dragon Quest IV") which is shown in the significant leap in overall text from *DQ3* to *DQ4* (Table 5). Aside from different dialogue available between day and night, NPCs now also react regularly to changes in the story. For instance, in Alena's chapter the player visits the town of Tempe where the villagers are commanded to sacrifice a young woman to a monster who has taken over. The dialogue at this point shows the NPCs in a distraught state, and paints a family drama around the woman, her fiancé, and her parents bending to the monster's request. After Alena defeats the monster, the villagers' dialogue reflects a bright change in mood and preparation for the woman's wedding. NPC dialogue in *DQ4* also changes between when the player first explores a town during the initial four chapters and the final chapter when you revisit these places years later as the Hero.

Table 5. Estimated number of words (Japanese text) per game.

Game	Words
DQ	6707
DQ2	19716
DQ3	25754
DQ4	65281
DQ5	65290
DQ6	289784

This focus on writing minor character arcs for NPCs, who once served purely utilitarian purposes, became a staple feature of the series by *DQ4*. *DQ5* follows this same approach to dialogue changes that evolve alongside narrative events as well as across its three acts to convey the effects of the passage of time. However, likely due to its fewer number of towns, the total text in *DQ4* and *DQ5* end up being about the same. The largest leap in text comes with *DQ6*, in which NPC dialogue frequently develops with evolving events and progression in the narrative. Horii notes that the game's total dialogue spanned 5000 pages across 9 binders, and for some towns the NPCs' dialogue changes up to ten times ("Dragon Quest VI"). So, while *DQ6* did not have as large a focus on developing its main cast as its two more linearly structured predecessors, it invests far more resources into representing and developing the lives and personalities of NPCs. This supports our reading that *DQ6* is less a personal narrative and more about showing how the desires of the people of an entire world shape the circumstances of a parallel one, with the state of the two realms shifting based on how events develop in the other. There is also a related practical concern that Horii notes, as the non-linear structure of *DQ6's* second half means players will revisit

towns looking for more quests, so being constantly provided new dialogue is also meant to stave off boredom ("Dragon Quest VI"). *DQ6's* sheer quantity of game space, text, and monster battle animations, along with its superior sound quality, are all enabled by its 32mb ROM capacity, which allows for more efficient access to stored data and potential for more content. While it is outside the scope of this study to discuss the subsequent *Dragon Quest* games, it is worth pointing out that they do not deviate significantly from the structure and priorities that *DQ6* established with late-SFC hardware.

3.6.5 Discussion

In this section we discuss the relevance of our results across Link 1 and Link 2 towards answering our research questions and following up on our hypotheses. Our data on the evolution of the first six *Dragon Quest* games demonstrates a general trend of quantitative improvements as the series progresses and the developers have access to better hardware. The leap with the least evident quantifiable evolution is from *DQ3* to *DQ4*, which is important to emphasize as it also marks a creative turning point for the series. Having achieved the realization of his original game design vision with *DQ3*, Horii's focus turned to characters—both playable companions and NPCs—in *DQ4*. The Link 1 data on character growth demonstrates the ways that Horii and his team tried to make the series' game systems (e.g. character stat progression) and narrative systems (e.g. structural event progression) support each other.

Whereas the incentive with building a party in *DQ3* was based purely on the functions of the character classes and creating a balanced team, in *DQ4* (and later games)

players might instead become motivated to select characters based on whose personalities or stories they prefer. This difference can be understood as engaging purely with a game design in contrast to also accounting for the narrative design. In *DQ3*, players' only motivator for how they decide to build their party is to try to make the gameplay easier or more challenging. In their study of player motivations, Daneels et al. would consider this a *hedonic* motivation since its basis is in operationalizing pleasure (179-180). In later games, some players might select characters based on more subjective, emotional connections to them as narrative elements start to factor more heavily into the main appeal of the series. This *eudaimonic* motivation is tied to the "meaning" of the gameplay experience and not just its enjoyment and capacity to elicit a flow state (Daneels et al. 182). Our findings suggest that the limited ROM available on *DQ 1-3's* cartridges meant that the development team prioritized function over form, iterating their games to make an engaging and rewarding console RPG experience. After this was accomplished, more memory was gradually dedicated to factors like text and visuals to offer more robust worldbuilding and eudaimonic fulfillment. Particularly notable examples of this include DQ4's Torneko chapter and DQ5's slavery section, which function as early cases of *poetic gameplay*: "a form of intentional disruptive gameplay in which players' established expectations regarding the 'form' of a digital game are intentionally broken… which can encourage more reflection on the overall game experience" (Daneels et al. 184).

A key aspect of *Dragon Quest's* identity is its focus on tradition. This can be most clearly observed in its frequent reuse of assets, including monster designs, NPC sprites, user interface, and sound effects. One might conclude, then, that this results in a stagnant and

unoriginal evolution of design across the series' history. A *GamePro* review of *DQ4* at the time of its western release calls it a "great, if predictable sequel" that improves some elements of the series but "goes nowhere new in other areas" (Haul 30). While *DQ4* resembles its predecessor on a superficial level, the review's criticisms point to how a professional critic will not necessarily appreciate the subtleties that make the game a creative leap forward narratively. Likewise, the significant increase in text with *DQ6* and the attention to worldbuilding it allows is another feature many critics and fans may not fully appreciate. The rhetoric around videogame marketing tends to emphasize the most visually apparent possibilities that a new evolution in hardware allows. Yet, this is not the type of iteration that the *Dragon Quest* series has based its identity around. Horii calls the series "homemade craftwork" in reference to its small development staff compared to other companies, and as a result "everyone gets to see everything, which lends a sense of overall unity" (qtd. in "Dragon Quest VI"). The stability of the series' core staff is rare in videogame development, but as a result every entry has both an individual and series-wide cohesion.

The quantitative data on cartridge chips, game maps, and game length helps confirm Berger's notion that "structure is the most critical part of game narrative" (22). While the leaps between *DQ 1-3*, or *DQ 5-6* show clear growth in scope that aligns with their technical advancements, *DQ 3-5's* scope (in terms of game space and time) is relatively similar—yet each campaign feels unique in terms of structure. *DQ3* established the design template for an epic JRPG structure, but its progression triggering criteria is full of MacGuffins that are abstracted from narrative context. *DQ4's* chapters each take place in a different part of the game world and its progression triggers are tied to the stories of its characters, making each

campaign feel more distinct. *DQ5* may have fewer overall locations, but it uses its generational structure to make revisiting towns interesting. Meanwhile, these qualitative differences we noted across *DQ 3-6* mean that their perceived quality will vary on player preference despite quantitative expansion. Players prioritizing hedonic pleasure through gameplay challenges and options will likely prefer the non-linearity and customization options of *DQ3* or *DQ6*, while players seeking eudaimonic experience may gravitate towards the narrative ambitions of *DQ4* or *DQ5*.

As crucial as mapping the games' technical makeup to alterations in its presentation and aesthetics is to our study, we do not wish to promote an overly technologically deterministic view to *Dragon Quest's* evolution. The development team's creative accomplishments with narrative and structure in *DQ4-6* did not *necessitate* better hardware even though the developers took advantage of it. However, the ways in which they did take advantage are still worth noting. In his platform study of the SNES/SFC, Arsenault provocatively discusses how the console did not offer a substantial leap from the NES in terms of the impact its tech had on changing the ways games were designed (8). However, the argument does not account for how the new tech allows for greater flourish in narrative design, such as in worldbuilding through the visual detail of new assets or dynamic presentation of narrative events. Even *DQ5's* introduction sequence—where the protagonist and his father are traveling on a boat, conveying a sense of movement through scrolling effects—was enabled by the new hardware. Too often critics and scholars alike are focused on medium-shifting innovation over subtle iteration. As a series focused more on its own traditions and vision over industry expectations for evolution, the *Dragon Quest* series serves

as a compelling case study for thinking about how technical affordances helped realize iterative leaps in not only game design but narrative design.

3.6.6 Conclusion

Our intent in this article has been to demonstrate the interconnectedness and potential for unique insights from our interdisciplinary method towards better understanding the first six *Dragon Quest* games holistically as simultaneously technical and artistic objects. The quantitative aspects of the study resulted in a few surprising revelations helpful for understanding the series' evolution. The leaps in text, for instance, gave a clear picture of how Horii—particularly starting with DQ4—wanted to represent even town NPCs as individuals. The plots on character stat progression allowed for more precise comparisons of how *DQ3's* classes were shifted into characters in *DQ4*, and how drastically *DQ5* departs from this lineage. While some of the observations made in the qualitative analysis would still be possible without the quantitative data to back it up, being presented with the specificities of the data better reflect the reality of what these games are—that is, creatively ambitious iterations on a game design co-determined by their development team's shifting priorities and technical affordances.

Therefore, we see the main value of this case study as a demonstration of the unique insights that this mixed-methods analysis allowed for. Our future goal for the project is to organize all our data and points for interdisciplinary analysis into a publicly available Twine file that will allow accessible and comprehensive access to view our findings and gain a better understanding of the *Dragon Quest* series' history and development in an interactive

format. With that said, the resources we gathered are already available in a GitHub repository and can serve as a framework for similar studies in other games and series. We hope this work generates interest in studying historically significant games and further unpacking the creative interplay of game developers and the hardware they worked with.

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Conclusion

As an exponentially popular form of entertainment in the digital age of the past few decades, videogames today are a widely consumed form of narrative—even if many players, critics, and scholars downplay narrative's relevance to the medium. It is easy to point to some of the most notorious titles in popular consciousness, from competitive blockbusters (e.g. *Fortnite*), culturally embedded classics (*Pac-Man*, *Tetris*), and even breakout indie hits (*Vampire Survivors*, *Balatro*) and think that narrative is superfluous to what most people crave from this medium's interactivity. My intent with this research is not to denounce this perspective, or to insist that audiences or researchers occupied with the purely ludic pleasures videogames are so effective at stimulating should focus more on their narrative elements. What I want to draw attention to is that when videogame developers do have narrative aspirations, and when players approach them seeking to be immersed in a narrative experience, it can result in compelling products and experiences. The titles I bring up in my case studies, from *Disco Elysium*, *Undertale*, *NieR; Automata*, *Dragon Quest IV*, *Sable*, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, etc. show priorities other than fun or mastery to the medium while still finding success as profitable entertainment. It is the side I have been fascinated with for much of my life, whose appeal I believe can be best conveyed to as large of an audience as possible through the key concepts I focus on throughout this dissertation.

I hope the understandings of immersion, roleplaying, and narrative design I developed throughout the dissertation provides a greater sense of literacy in how videogames function as narratives and the potential for meaning developers can embed and players can

cultivate. This is, of course, a massive area of research and there is only so much I could cover. As an integrated thesis, much of the research I ended up pursuing was shaped around the calls for book chapters and research opportunities I encountered during my studies. I therefore shaped the project around these three interrelated key terms that I saw as central to what makes videogames a unique and compelling medium narratively. This approach gave the dissertation the cohesion and flexibility it required as a single project housing many smaller ones, and allowed me to explore the topics from multiple theoretical and disciplinary angles. With that said, the approach comes with limitations. Although I was able to speak on a wide range of topics encompassed across my key terms, I did not get to delve into them with the degree of attention they deserve. On the bright side, this leaves multiple doors open for future pursuits and projects.

Sections 3.3 and 3.4 offer a theoretical and methodological basis for integrating the player's subjectivity and individual developers' (or "shy decision-makers") contributions to the text of narrative design, respectively. While I believe the research supporting these sections is sound for establishing that basis, further and deeper engagement with case studies is an essential next step to proving their value inside and outside game studies. To expand on Section 3.3, I want to more closely examine the videogame analyses players conduct on journalistic websites, personal blogs and video essays that fluidly incorporate relevant personal reflections into a 'reading' of a text. Some *YouTube* channels where I have seen this done consistently and effectively include Action Button, Codex Entry, Noah Caldwell-Gervais, Super Butter Buns, Nakey Jakey, Jacob Geller, and hbomberguy. These and related works would serve as valuable case studies to explore how a game's narrative design is

interpreted through analysis that accounts for how a game's fixed procedures and representations impact the meaning an individual derives from their gameplay.

In Section 3.4, I applied my approach to developer-centric analysis to a single case study of Yoshiaki Koizumi's early career, but there is still much to understand about the ways that individual developers contribute to the vision of the game in such a highly collaborative context. YouTube channel Noclip has released a number of documentaries spotlighting the teams behind less often discussed creative contributions in indie studios and big-budget studios alike. Similar to the *Pyschodyssey* series discussed in that section, Noclip is an independent, crowd-funded creator, so these documentaries provide greater depth and reliability in showing the reality of the work done in these studios than corporately overseen postmortems and interviews published on major outlets tend to provide. I would like to expand on this line of research by doing an analysis of these documentaries by curating the contributions of unsung developers. Moreover, I have received ethics clearance (REB #46695) to conduct interviews with narrative designers and related individuals who conceive and shape the aesthetic vision behind games. With this ethics clearance, I will solicit interviewees from development teams of various sizes to compare and contrast the practice of narrative design in different industry contexts. Through these efforts, I intend to better showcase the value of my method for boosting videogame literacy and preserving videogame history. I also believe this method can work in tandem with the mixed-methods interdisciplinary study I conducted with Dr. Cristiano Politowski in Paper 5. We are planning to continue this work by exploring the creation of more franchises and conducting cross-analyses of them to provide a more robust historical argument.

Paper 4's discussion of *Prometheus* is an attempt at critical design-based research-creation in the dissertation, which I applied again in another Twine game as part of a Learning Innovation and Teaching Enhancement (LITE) grant project I worked on with Dr. Marcel O'Gorman at the University of Waterloo. The game, *Borderline*, puts players in the role of a game director whose indie studio had just been acquired by a successful and ubiquitous game publisher. The character, playfully named Zelda after the princess from *The Legend of Zelda*, must navigate situations and conversations around control of her and her team's vision for the game, inequitable interactions between people of differing power dynamics, and a subtly dystopian corporate office that rewards and deducts employee points based on monitored behaviour. *Borderline's* subject matter relates to Section 3's discussion of game development authorship and would have been a suitable additional example of research-creation. It is a project I would still like to continue to develop as an interactive educational tool that represents some of the reported problematic working conditions within the game industry.

While I am satisfied with the theory of single-player digital roleplaying I developed across Section 2's three papers, I see potential for expanding their ideas. Paper 1's discussion of the connection between roleplaying and self-reflection could be supplemented with more netnography. Perhaps it would even be worth beginning a study and soliciting participants who would be willing to submit reflective field notes on their roleplaying experiences. Furthermore, Paper 2's cursory typology of RPG avatars is by no means comprehensive and could be expanded to account for more nuances across narrative design and address the particularities of avatars in different genres. Finally, Paper 3's study on how videogame

achievements/trophies can detract from or support player-driven roleplaying practices might benefit by establishing a typology of achievement design across a diverse set of videogames from different genres, years, and studio sizes. This would allow for a more thorough look at how developers have been creatively navigating the pervasiveness of achievement systems in modern games. Another related study could empirically examine whether there is a significant connection between achievement hunters and those who follow the Gamer ideology of masculinist, 'just-for-fun' rhetoric who often resist the diversification of game industry personnel and representation.

While looking to the potential future of this research is important, I also want to reflect more on the process getting this far. This research originally began as an investigation into the emancipatory qualities of videogame play: the ideas of immersion as a liberation of self-consciousness, of role-playing as identity formation, and of videogame narrative as an extension of real experience. During the process, however, I realized this idealistic framework must be curtailed with the compulsive consumption encouraged by a risk-averse industry and the loud portion of gamers who actively resist narratively innovative shifts in gaming. So, while those ideas are still present throughout the work to an extent, I pivoted to ground them in more concrete discussions of game history and game development. I was trained and fully invested in postmodern theory while pursuing my English MA at Western University, so integrating my theoretical basis towards a more tangible material context came with a learning curve, but I believe it resulted in a project with more concrete findings for academic game studies and popular game discourse. An appeal towards the latter became increasingly important to me as the dissertation developed. As Sarah Stang and Shira Chess

both address, the norms of the videogame industry and Gamer culture can only be transformed from the inside. I followed the integrated thesis model so that I can begin putting my ideas out there as I moved deeper into my research. I also decided to supplement my academic writing by working in public-facing games writing.

After completing my comprehensive exams, I applied to work for RPGFan: an independently ran games criticism website that covers RPGs, adventure games, and walking simulators, and hybrid games from those genres that tend to have a degree of emphasis on story. RPGFan's staff is filled with a diverse range of individuals united by their fascination with these games and who are each allowed to bring their own special interests to the website's coverage. These interests range from videogame music, reviewing obscure indies, spotlighting crowd-funded projects, etc., with my own contributions being focused on compelling narrative design. In the two plus years since I started working there, I have extended my academic research interests into the work I do there through my selection and approach to reviews, features, and podcast appearances. Most notably, I have been building a "Narrative Design Analysis" series of articles where I spotlight and analyze games with particularly creative narrative design based on the method I created in Section 3.3. The website's Editor-in-Chief, Mike Salbato, lets staff write based on their interests and using their voice rather than mandating SEO-driven content for cynically increasing site traffic. At a time when many of the biggest publications in games writing (e.g. Kotaku, Polygon, Destructoid, Giant Bomb) are being subsumed by corporate media conglomerates like The Gamur's Group and Valnet who let go established staff and enforce a focus on click-bait content (Plunkett, Landymore), websites like RPGFan serve as crucial venues for keeping the

passion and integrity of videogame writing alive outside personal blogs and video essays. For as long as I continue to work at RPGFan, I will apply ideas from my academic research and interests and translate them into public-facing content.

As generative AI has exponentially grown into a pervasive global concern in the past two years, I see this research's particular interest in individual player and developer creativity as even more valuable than when I had begun. If interesting writing *in* and *about* videogames is to survive in the age of systemic homogeneity and tolerance for AI-writing across popular publications and videogame studios, it must embrace the centrality of the human subject in making videogames meaningful. It must explore the way a videogame makes us feel and the way it fulfills or clashes with our identity. It must look past the superficial rhetorics pushed forth by the industry that insist the greatest 'meaning' to be found in a game lies in new graphical power or mastering as many games as possible through exhaustive achievement-based play. And it must acknowledge and celebrate the individuals—and groups of individuals struggling through interdisciplinary collaboration—who make these videogame experiences possible by embedding their talents and visions into what the players ultimately interact with. I see academics and non-academics alike foregrounding this in recent texts such as Fullerton and Farber's *The Well-Read Game: On Playing Thoughtfully* or Mathew Kumar's personal essay anthology, *Every Game I've Finished 14>24*. By foregrounding the human creativity that makes videogames interesting and meaningful in the first place, people passionate about the medium can prioritize one's strange, individual experiences over the fashionable consensus AI is so effective at replicating.

I believe cultivating an interest in the ways such games are made and played is especially important at a time where AI is beginning to be implemented for creative shortcuts and most of the game industry's profitability is in live-service titles designed to keep players in a flow state through questionable monetization practices and a focus on content for content's sake. Respected development teams who have specialized in narratively cohesive single-player experiences, such as BioWare, Arkane Studios, and Rocksteady Studios, have had greedy publishers like EA and Microsoft push them towards creating multiplayer-based live-service games *Anthem*, *Redfall*, and *Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League*, respectively. Each of these games were critical and financial failures that disappointed fans of the studios' previous work and resulted in mass layoffs of individuals being pushed outside their creative comfort zone for the financial gain of corporate investors. In the wake of continuous layoffs caused by projects that prioritize trend-chasing ludic-centered design, multiplayer functionality, and compulsive audience engagement over creative variety and the unique expressiveness of single-player experience, it is increasingly important to celebrate and preserve the legacy of the classic games that set and broke standards for the expressiveness of their genres, as well as the current indie developers that seek to further explore their artistic potential through thoughtful and personal iteration.

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Appendix A

A Journey through Erdrea's Settlements (*Dragon Quest XI*)



Figure A1. Cobblestone in Dragon Quest XI

My journey began in Cobblestone – the village where I was not born but raised. A foundling who was not yet aware of his ties to Erdrea's fate, humbled by the isolated, serene green pastures in which he came to age. The rest of Erdrea gives no heed to Cobblestone and Cobblestone gives no heed to the rest of Erdrea. It is a settlement sustained by agrarian produce and proximity to the Cobblestone Tor: a towering mountain tied to the village's culture. All villagers must climb the Tor when they come of age and are treated to a sweeping panoptic view of Erdrea, thus coming to understand their place in a much larger world where all is connected through Yggdrasil, the great World Tree, each of whose leaves lay claim to one individual life in the world. That is my destination.

Although my destiny lies far outside the bounds of Cobblestone's mountainous enclosure, its spirit rests within me forever. I cannot walk its dirt paths without being reminded that these people will forever welcome me home, no matter when I return. Cobblestone is the good in

all of us, a testament to the human value of intimate communities, life at its most pure and simple, both part of the larger world and not.

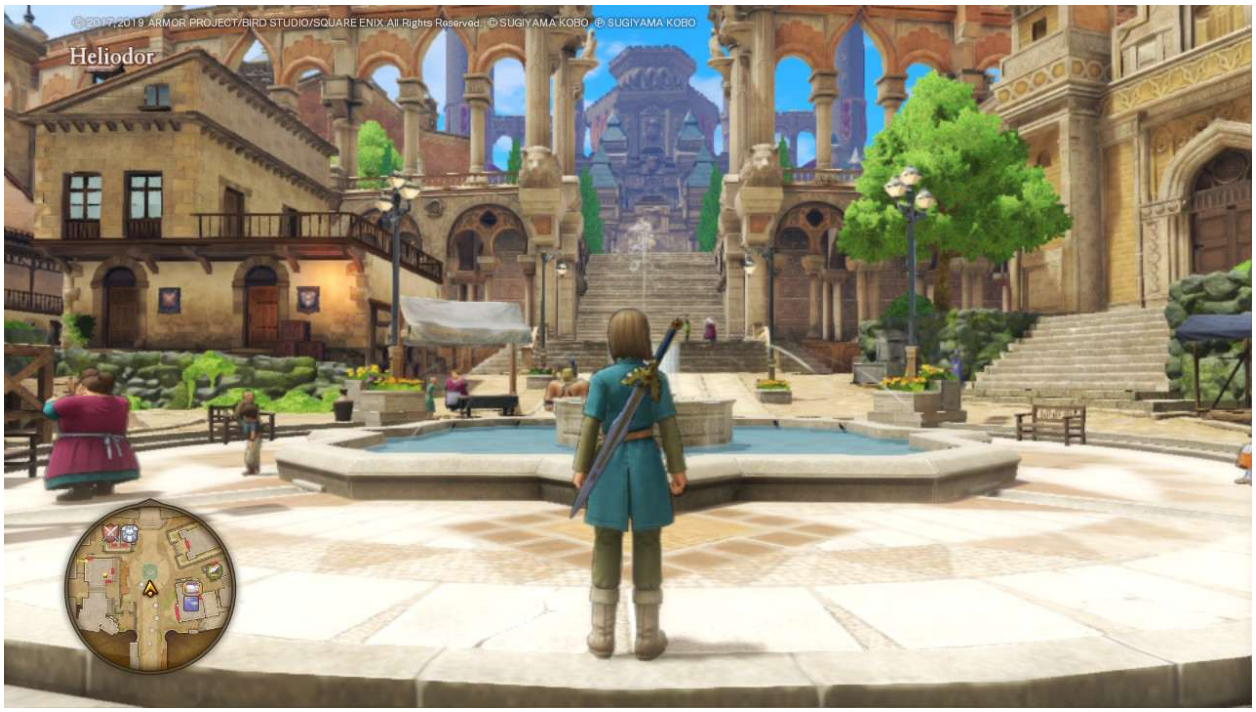


Figure A2. Uptown Heliodor in Dragon Quest XI

My first stop was Heliodor, Erdrea's largest and mightiest state, built at the world's center. It couldn't be more different from Cobblestone. From the massive layers of stone walls surrounding its perch on top of a grand hill to the intricately designed circular plazas, Heliodor is a testament to how humans change when they become densely clustered in a space sequestered from the natural world. Its people concern themselves less with one another and more with the local attractions: music, shops, and the famous knights that train at the city's castle – an unmistakable structure at the back of the city that one must gradually ascend to reach. They debate which of the kingdom's knights is the strongest, which is the most handsome, and other such debates that I did not realize humans deeply concerned themselves with. I had already thought the houses composing the east and west sides of town quite impressively built, and then I ascended to the royal courtyard on my way to the castle only to witness an even different set of houses that were double the size of those before. The

people here spoke and acted even differently, seemingly content to sit idly amongst each other and gossip about the acquisitions of their neighbours. I cannot deny that there is an exhilaration to walking through this intricately built and populated place.

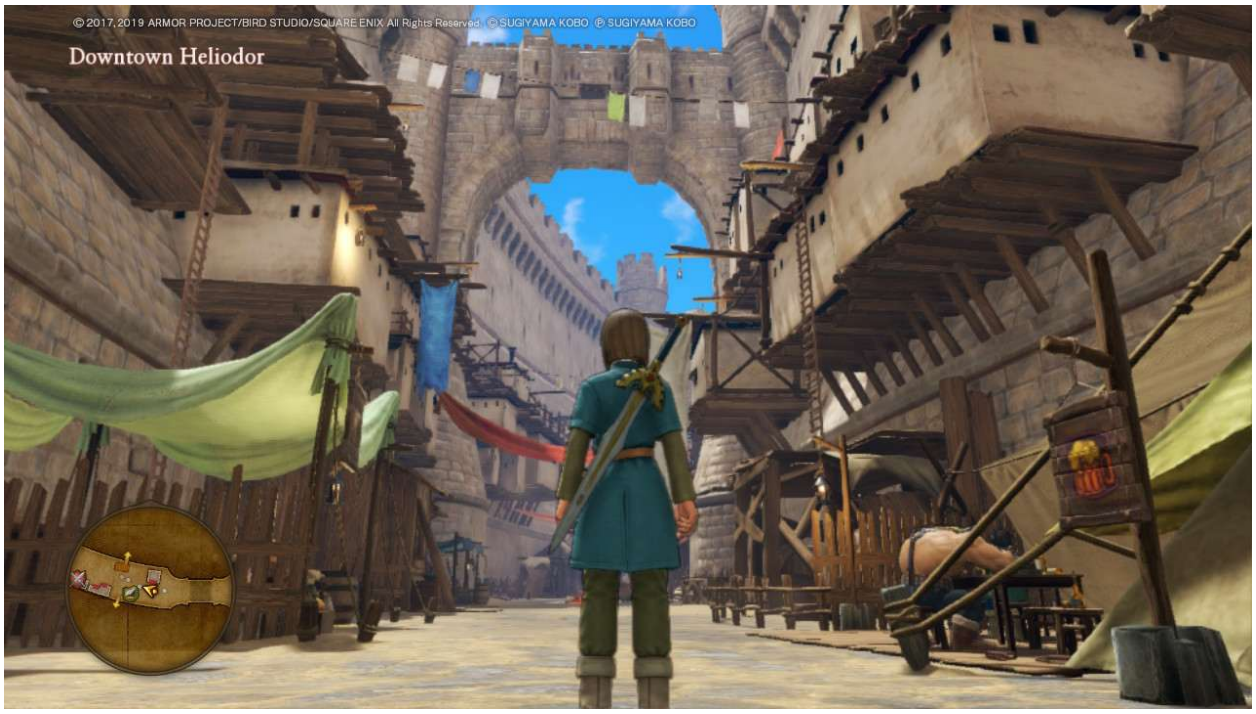


Figure A3. Downtown Heliodor in Dragon Quest XI

And then there's downtown Heliodor, hidden well out of sight of anyone entering the city from the front gate. One must descend a carefully tucked and guarded set of stairs in a corner of the upper city to reach it, which take you down to a linear stretch wedged between two of the city's walls that create the sense that they are containing you against your will. The paved streets here are layered with dirt, the houses mere tents and shacks that line the walls' sides both from the ground and built atop uneven planks of wood built up against the walls themselves. These houses can only be reached by ladders and ropes, on which some children play freely and happily. Some merchants in tents offer to read my fortune or offer some "priceless advice for a mere 5G," citizens are huddled amicably around a fire in the middle of the street, drunk men at the makeshift bar scream the highest praise about a dancer named Roxy, and a child cries alone in an empty house. I must admit that I am perplexed to see that

this Heliodor and the one atop the walls constitute the same place. A man I speak to assures me that despite its conditions, this is home to everyone who's found themselves here. I suppose I understand. It certainly feels more like Cobblestone down here than on the upper side. And yet it is fundamentally different, especially with the knowledge that these twin realities exist right next to each other – crucially out of each other's sight.



Figure A4. Octagonia in Dragon Quest XI

Octagonia is a city of human pleasures, constructed according to our kind's desires for the play of competition and chance – as well as the corruption and dishonesty that these compulsions often breed. From the outside Octagonia looks like a single round, colossal structure, which is of course because the city itself lies entirely within – sheltered from sun, rain, trees, or anything else that could interfere with the populace's focus on contests of prowess and gambling. When entering the city you find yourself on a bridge leading directly into the arena, clearly signalled as such by the massive statue of Ser Hendrick, Heliodor's most revered warrior, raising his sword as if to smite you. If you can resist this immediate allure you will see the city's residential area off to the sides and below the bridge, as if an

afterthought in the grand scheme of its design. The only stairway providing access to this lower level is off to the eastern side of the arena and is forked by another stairway leading up to the city's casino on the higher level. The citizens' discourse either focuses on their own winnings or losses, or the winnings of losses of those warriors valiant enough to fight in the arena. Their talk is enlivened by the action of play that defines their culture – each one wholly invested in this inward little world they've devoted their hearts to.



Figure A5. Arboria in Dragon Quest XI

My final stop before reaching Yggdrasil is Arboria, an ancient and sacred city that lies a fair distance away from the rest of Erdrea's human settlements, at the feet of the World Tree Herself. I am told that my fate is tied to this place and the deep history that it preserves. Bleach-white pillars and columns of carefully tended stone uphold its ancient buildings and symbolic structures, which spread among the circumference of the city. A massive courtyard lies at the city's centre, but unlike the pleasant presentation of Heliodor's courtyards, which conveyed a sense of comfort and pleasure, this one is emptied of things and people – reserved only for the rituals its people pay to their city's founder, Serenica: loyal companion

and lover of Erdwin, Erdrea's legendary hero and my ancestor, who long ago battled the Darkness that threatened to corrupt the souls of all people. Carved in the great mountain lying behind the city's temple is the figure of Serenica, arms spread in and loving and welcoming gesture. Northwest of the courtyard lies the Grove of Repose, a place filled with such palpable silence that the mind cannot help but be at peace when resting among its ancient trees. It is here that I now lie, reminded of my friends and family in Cobblestone, of the many other cities I have travelled through to get here. I see Erdrea as a whole, at a distance, perfect in its simultaneous displacements and threads. Each city telling a different story of these beings called humans. This is my world and it is a world I would die for.

Report from Unit 2B:

Notes on Earth's Remaining Settlements (*NieR: Automata*)



Figure A6. The Bunker in NieR: Automata

I have been paired with scanner unit 9S to do some reconnaissance on Earth for the war effort against the machine lifeforms and eradicate any threats facing the Resistance. Getting some rest inside the cold hull of the Bunker has been a peaceful rest following the violent

end of my last mission. There is a serenity to only being surrounded our fellow androids – the steady hum of working machinery – and staring out a window into the black emptiness of space is always calming, but I look forward to serving on Earth once again. The Operator and Command units here are all stuck to their screens, getting the data we need to fight, but they don't seem to understand what is actually happening in the war below. I don't particularly enjoy talking with them. Nevertheless, all android units serve a role in our essential purpose: destroy the machines that have invaded Earth and the aliens that have created them.

For the Glory of Mankind.



Figure A7. Resistance Camp in NieR: Automata

9S and I have landed on Earth and reached the Resistance Camp in the city ruins. Maybe it's because of all the Earthly colours surrounding them, but the androids here somehow seem livelier than the operators stuck in the bunker. Being so close to the war all this time must have affected some of their logic receptors. They long to somehow see their lost comrades again, or at the very least honour memories of the deceased through safekeeping objects that

once belonged to them. A patch of broken concrete at the centre of the camp has provided a sort of garden for white flowers and the resistance members seem to enjoy it. Unusual behavior for androids. The camp's mechanic said something interesting when I was purchasing some new chips from him. He told me about his old leg – how it was the only part of his body that hasn't been replaced since he was originally constructed. He wondered whether he would still be himself after that leg was also replaced. I must admit I dismissed the thought at first. As a combat unit my entire body has been destroyed many times but my data always gets uploaded into a near identical body. But I suppose it isn't fully identical, is it? Is an android made up only of data, then, or are our bodies also part of who we are?

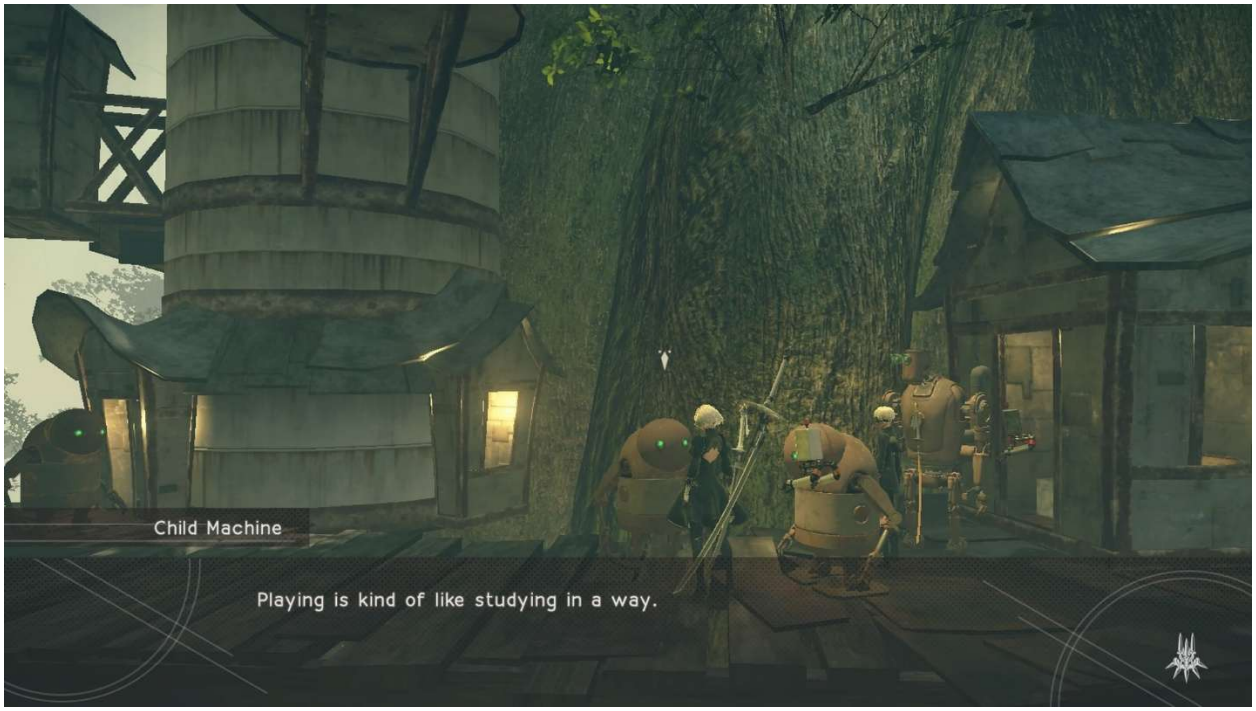


Figure A8. Machine Village in NieR: Automata

9S and I stumbled upon a village run entirely by machine lifeforms, hidden away behind the Amusement Park. Unlike most of the other machines on Earth, however, these units showed no signs of hostility and were even able to speak with us. As we approached, they all waved white flags to signal their peace and we were willing to talk with their leader, Pascal. Pascal wishes for an end to the war between androids and machines. He explained that there are

other machines on Earth that have escaped the singularity and thus have no reason to continue this thousands-year long conflict. He no longer wants to watch those he cares for destroyed – a thought that I am inclined to understand. It was strange walking through the village and talking with the other machines. They have no orders and seem to have adapted to an aimless existence. They speak of love, beauty, desires, and existence itself, as if mimicking the thoughts and feelings of humans. Even the village itself is built out of remnants of human civilization and designed to replicate the types of buildings humans used to live in. 9S keeps reminding me that machines can't have feelings – that they aren't actually alive – but I can't stop thinking about Pascal's Village. What separates us from them? Humans programmed us androids to think and feel, but can these sensations also be learned? Is there a difference between *acting* human and *being* human?