“Impossible to Understand and Madness to Investigate”:
Videogame Narratives and the Theme of Insanity
in American Popular Culture

Georgia Hinterleitner
0415405

DISSErbATION

ingereich im Rahmen des
Doktoratsstudiums der Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft
am Institut für Amerikastudien

an der Leopold-Franzens-Universität Innsbruck

Betreuerin: Univ.-Prof. Mag. Dr. Gudrun Grabher
Zweitbetreuer: Univ.-Prof. Mag. Dr. Thomas Schröder

Innsbruck, am 09.05.2018
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Gudrun Grabher, for her many years of guidance and care, as well as her invaluable advice on both research and life matters.

Further, I would like to thank my mother for kindly assisting in the proofreading process.

My unending gratitude goes to my dear friends

Kim, whose wit and passion for writing never fail to kindle my own

Mary, Joanna and Rosanne, whose kindness and unwavering faith make me want to try harder

Ann and Cerine, who always help me to put things into perspective

And Steffi, whose shoulder to cry on really deserves a standing ovation (not to mention a break).

Moreover, I would like to thank Dr Ober, whose continued aid allowed me to see this project through to its conclusion.

And finally, I wish to give thanks to the University of Innsbruck for the generous support rendered via its doctoral grant program, “Doktoratsstipendien aus der Nachwuchsförderung der Universität Innsbruck.”
# Table of Contents

1. **INTRODUCTION** .................................................................................................................. 4

2. **THINGS THAT GO BEEP: DEFINING THE VIDEOGAME** .................................................. 9

   2.1. **DEFINITION PROBLEMS** .............................................................................................. 10

   2.2. **THE NAME GAME** ....................................................................................................... 18

   2.3. **COMPUTERS AND THE ADAPTABLENESS OF GAMES** ........................................... 21

       2.3.1. **Common Elements of Games?** .............................................................................. 22

       2.3.2. **The Focus on Rules, and Its Problems** .................................................................. 26

   2.4. **A SUDDEN INTEREST? (VIDEO-)GAME STUDIES AS A 21ST-CENTURY PHENOMENON** .................................................................................................................. 32

3. **VIDEOGAMES IN US-AMERICAN CULTURE** ..................................................................... 39

   3.1. **AN AMERICAN TALE: US INFLUENCE ON THE EMERGING MEDIUM** ......................... 40

       3.1.1. **The Birthplace of Milestone Innovations** ............................................................... 40

       3.1.2. **Marketing, Translation, Censorship: Some Consequences of the Great Crash** ......... 44

   3.2. **AMERICAN ATTITUDES TOWARDS GAMES: THE INFLUENCE OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE** .................................................................................................................. 50

       3.2.1. **Pattern Recognition: Videogames and Media Panics** .............................................. 54

       3.2.2. **Videogames and their (Presumed) Audience** ......................................................... 59

   3.3. **THINGS THAT GO BEEP REVISITED: VIDEOGAMES AND AMERICAN CULTURE** .......... 63

       3.3.1. **Games, Art and Entertainment** ................................................................................ 64

           a. Cinema .......................................................................................................................... 64

           b. Art .................................................................................................................................. 68

           c. Music ............................................................................................................................ 71

       3.3.2. **Games and Areas of Daily Life** ............................................................................. 75

           a. Business and Marketing ............................................................................................ 75

           b. Education and Research ............................................................................................ 78

           c. Social Issues and Activism ........................................................................................ 82

           d. Health and Health Care .............................................................................................. 86

   3.4. **SUMMING UP** .............................................................................................................. 90

4. **VIDEOGAMES AS NARRATIVE MEDIA** .............................................................................. 95

   4.1. **SO SIMILAR, YET SO DIFFERENT: APPROACHING GAME NARRATIVE** ..................... 98

       4.1.1. **Multiple Channels** ................................................................................................. 99

       4.1.2. **Where Game Narrative Begins and Ends** ............................................................. 105

       4.1.3. **Interactivity and Mechanics** ................................................................................. 108

   4.2. **IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES? PERSPECTIVES ON GAMES TELLING STORIES** .... 112

       4.2.1. **When “Game” and “Story” Collide** ..................................................................... 115

       4.2.2. **Particle Physics: Challenge and Context** ............................................................ 119

       4.2.3. **Beyond the Rules: Game Narrative and Participatory Culture** ............................. 125

   4.4. **FIRST PERSON(A), SECOND PERSON(A), THIRD PERSON(A): PLAYER VERSUS CHARACTER** ................................................................................................................... 137

   4.5. **THE CHALLENGES OF CREATING GAME NARRATIVE** ........................................ 146

   4.6. **A NEW FRONTIER: GAMES SHAPING STORIES, STORIES SHAPING GAMES** ............ 162

5. **MADNESS AND MENTAL ILLNESS IN AMERICA** .............................................................. 166
6. STRANGER THAN FICTION: MADNESS AND AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE .......... 215

6.1. MADNESS AND THE SUPERNATURAL ................................................................. 217
6.2. MADNESS AND EVIL ........................................................................................... 221
6.3. MADNESS AND DISSONANCE .......................................................................... 225
6.4. GOTHIC MADNESS .......................................................................................... 226
6.5. MADNESS AND DISFRANCHISEMENT ............................................................... 229
6.6. MADNESS AND PSYCHIATRY .......................................................................... 234
6.7. AGE-OLD MADNESS IN A BRAND-NEW MEDIUM ........................................ 239

7. MADNESS AND VIDEOGAMES .......................................................................... 242

a) Rendering Madness Playable .............................................................................. 242
b) Providing an Empathetic Experience of Mental Illness ........................................ 245
c) Using Literary Forms of Madness to Tell Stories ................................................ 249

7.1. OF GODS, GHOSTS, AND THE GOTHIC: SILENT HILL 2 AND AMERICAN GOTHIC MADNESS .............................................................................................................. 252

7.1.1. Building a Mystery: Ambiguity and the Illusion of Sanity ................................ 257
7.1.2. Rising from the Grave: Silent Hill as a Metaphor of Madness ...................... 261

7.2. THE DISEASE OF VILLAINS ................................................................................ 267

7.2.1. Camp and Creepy: Villains and the Entertainment Value of Madness .......... 269
7.2.2. Sympathy for the Devil: The Justification of Villainous Madness .................. 275

7.3. UNDOING THE HERO: MADNESS AS A TOOL OF DECONSTRUCTION .......... 280

7.3.1. Drakengard and the Constraints of the Fairytale ............................................. 280
7.3.2. Spec Ops: The Line and Aspirations towards Heroism .................................... 290

a) Heroic (Self-)Construction, Heroic (Self-)Deception ............................................ 292
b) Justifying the Unjustifiable .................................................................................... 295
c) “None of This Would’ve Happened if You’d Just Stopped”: Madness and the Reality of Heroism ................................................................. 301

7.4. THE MADWOMAN IN THE MACHINE: PORTAL 2 AND FEMALE MADNESS ................................................................. 307

a) The Making of a Madwoman .................................................................................. 309
b) Finding Sanity in Madness: Portal 2 and the Return to Conformity ....................... 314

7.5. WALLS THAT TALK: THE DIGITAL RESURRECTION OF THE INSANE ASYLUM ................................................................................................................. 320

7.6. SUBCONSCIOUS PLAYGROUNDS: CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF THE DISORDERED MIND ................................................................. 331

7.6.1. Spatial Representations of the Mind and the Role of Psychoanalysis .............. 333
7.6.2. Persona 4 and the Jungian Legacy .................................................................... 337

a) Into the Mind Labyrinth ......................................................................................... 338
List of Tables and Figures

TAB. 1: “A TYPOLOGY OF MEDIA AFFECTING NARRATIVITY” ................................................................. 100

FIG. 1: “THE CLASSIC GAME MODEL” ................................................................................................... 30
FIG. 2: “MOUNTAINS OUT OF MOLEHILLS: A TIMELINE OF MEDIA-INFLAMED FEARS” ...................... 54
FIG. 3: “THE GAME NARRATIVE TRIANGLE” ....................................................................................... 134
FIG. 4: DIVISION OF AUTHORSHIP. ...................................................................................................... 135
FIG. 5: EVENT CHAIN IN ASSASSIN’S CREED. .................................................................................... 151
FIG. 6: OVERARCHING EVENT CHAINS IN ASSASSIN’S CREED. ......................................................... 152
FIG. 7: “EXAMPLE OF A BRANCHING STORYLINE” ........................................................................... 153
FIG. 8: THE STORY OVERVIEW MENU OF TACTICS OGRE, SHOWING THE PATHS TAKEN AND NOT TAKEN. 154
FIG. 9: “A BRANCHING STORY STRUCTURE IN WHICH BRANCHES RECOMBINE” ................................ 155
FIG. 10: “MASS EFFECT 2 SUICIDE MISSION INFOGRAPHIC” ............................................................ 157
FIG. 11: “UNMET NEED FOR MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AMONG COUNTIES WITH AN OVERALL SHORTAGE” ........................................................................................................ 193
1. Introduction

The year is 1961. In a computer lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), a gathering of technology aficionados comprised of students and some faculty members known as the Tech Model Railroad Club is enthusiastically exploring the capabilities of the Programmed Data Processor-1 (PDP-1), one of the very first computers small enough to fit inside a single room. Unlike most computers of the era, which can only be operated by specially trained technicians, the PDP-1 places its operating privileges into the hands of anyone curious enough to try, a freedom of which the budding computer geeks at MIT are happy to take advantage. While many concentrate on modifying existing programs (then encoded on punched paper tape) or writing new software for mathematical experiments, one small group of hackers want to outdo all the programming feats of their colleagues. They plan to amaze them with something that has never been seen before – a digital creation that, decades later, will be credited as the first “real” videogame. During the next several months, the team around Steve Russell, Martin Graetz and Wayne Wiitanen channel their love of science fiction into Spacewar, whose concept is as brilliant as it is simple: Two spaceships are caught in the gravity well of a star, struggling to maintain a stable orbit while aiming rockets at each other. After months of hard work, the game is finally complete; spring of 1962 sees long queues forming in front of the PDP-1 laboratory at all hours as fascinated MIT students and staff wait in line to play Spacewar, to the point where the precious computer is scarcely used for anything else. The feverish enthusiasm for the game is perhaps best summed up by a news bulletin in the campus magazine

---

1 The title of this thesis “Impossible to understand, and madness to investigate” is a reference to a remark the Ancient Greek philosopher Sophocles is said to have once made about the subject of astronomy. The context and definitive source of the saying appear to have been lost to time (publications utilizing the quote go no further than attributing it to Sophocles, with the dates of his birth and death [496-405 BCE] offered as a timeframe), but it lends itself well to a tongue-in-cheek quip about a subject that has proven to be just as amazing, baffling and occasionally vexing to a great many 21st-century minds as the stars and planets once were to the people of antiquity: “Videogames? Impossible to understand, and madness to investigate.”


Decuscope, which humorously opens with: “If, when walking down the halls of MIT, you should happen to hear strange cries of ‘No! No! Turn! Fire! ARRRGGGHHH!!,’ do not be alarmed. Another western is not being filmed – MIT students and others are merely participating in a new sport, SPACEWAR!” And yet, despite the obvious appeal of this creation straight out of a science-fiction novel, it stands to reason that none of the people involved could have anticipated that they were bringing a new mass medium into being.

In the 55 years that have passed since then, videogames have evolved from a technological curiosity into one of the most popular and lucrative entertainment mediums of the 20th and 21st centuries. What began as a small passion project by a handful of students is now a global industry whose products enthral an estimated 1.2 billion people worldwide, and whose market is only expected to keep growing. Nowhere is the impact and influence of the new medium seen and felt as clearly as in the country of its birth: The United States remains at the forefront of game-related developments as a major hub for the creation and publication of videogames, as well as the home of one of the world’s largest and diverse player demographics: More than a third of Americans (approximately 155 million) regularly play, and spend a truly staggering sum of money on their favorite entertainment – no less than $24.5 billion in 2016 alone. These impressive numbers imply not only that the American media landscape has undergone considerable changes due to the rise of videogames, but that they have made a deep and lasting impact on American popular culture. Media and communications scholar Mark J. P. Wolf describes videogames as having come to play a central role in American popular culture, noting that “[...] the games we play (and work at) tell us about American popular culture and where it is going.”

This thesis will explore the mutual influence between videogames and American popular culture on a narrative level by examining how themes present in narratives of American popular culture are incorporated into the stories told by videogames, and how videogames – via their unique immersive,
interactive characteristics and the structural complexity of their narratives – are capable of transforming and expanding upon these themes, thereby creating new perspectives on tales as old as time. This exploration will be anchored by the theme of madness, whose exceptional prominence in 20th/21st-century American popular culture and relevance to current sociopolitical and cultural issues associated with mental health and mental health care make it ideal for examining how the new mass medium of videogames adapts and enriches the collective of narratives that was, until very recently, transported primarily by movies and books. It will culminate in the detailed analysis of nine videogames published between 1995 and 2016/17, a timeframe which was selected due to the rapid evolution of game narratives enabled by the technological advancements made during this period (e.g. the invention of three-dimensional computer graphics, faster processors, improved audio, the creation of spacious storage media such as CD-ROMs and DVDs, internet availability to private citizens, etc.), which opened up a wealth of new avenues for storytelling, such as the inclusion of voiced dialogue, the creation of ever-vaster and more detailed virtual spaces, more diverse visual styles, and ever more intricate game mechanics. The titles selected for analysis are defined by the centrality of the theme of madness to their narratives, their innovative methods for representing it, as well as their popularity and creative influence. This analysis will not only show that centuries-old portrayals of madness have expanded into and thrived in the digital realm, but also how the unique characteristics of the medium of videogames have transformed the engagement with the theme by rendering madness not only readable, viewable, or audible, but experiential.

Since both videogames and madness are complex and controversial topics in their own right, this thesis will adopt a roughly tripartite structure. This will serve to establish a sufficient context for the eventual analysis, and, more importantly, to demonstrate the particular timely relevance of this topic to American society and culture.

The first part, spanning Chapters 1 to 3, will focus on videogames as a medium, beginning with an attempt to define it and identify its general characteristics (i.e. what makes a videogame a videogame), a surprisingly difficult task given the many different forms spawned by this rapidly evolving medium in the relatively short period of time since becoming accessible to a wider audience in the mid- to late 1970s. The second chapter will situate the new medium within US-American culture by exploring not only the driving historical influence of the US in the development of videogames, but also the ways in which various

aspects of videogames have seeped into and integrated with various parts of American daily life, as well as the widespread public anxiety caused by their skyrocketing popularity and influence. The first two chapters not only exist to provide the necessary context for a deeper exploration of game narratives, but also in order to discuss and, if possible, resolve common misconceptions perpetuated by public (lay) discourse which present obstacles to developing a nuanced understanding of the medium in general and the significance of its narrative capabilities in particular – especially in the US, but in Europe as well. Finally, the third chapter will veer away from the sociocultural aspects of videogames in order to focus entirely on their capabilities and peculiarities as a narrative medium. Research into game narratives is still incredibly sparse compared to research into other aspects of videogames (e.g. the psychological effects of play, the study of “gamer subculture,” research into the creation of virtual economies, the relationship between virtual avatars and their players, etc.), but only becomes more vital as more and more videogames strive to tell stories every bit as complex and meaningful as those found in fiction and film. The chapter will focus on highlighting the similarities and differences between game narratives and traditional media narratives, as well as explore the limits of traditional narratology when it comes to examining the narrative structures and techniques commonly used by games. As will be discussed in detail, the medium of videogames possesses a structural complexity that far exceeds that of most traditional media, which in turn affects the structural complexity of their narratives. In addition, videogame narratives require the active participation of their audience – the players – in the creation of their narratives; through the act of playing, each player contributes to the telling of the game story, which is individualized by their in-game decision-making and behavior. This is not to say that game narratives represent an evolution in storytelling, but that they possess an array of means for transporting their stories which are not or only partially present in traditional media, and which thus require vastly different approaches.

The second part of this thesis focuses on the subject of madness – a term deliberately chosen, despite its pejorative connotations, for its literary and aesthetic connotations rather than medical accuracy. Although the primary topic of game narratives take a backseat in this part, there nevertheless remains an indirect connection: the fact that videogames, with their increasingly complex narratives, are also beginning to delve into increasingly complex issues like madness precisely at a time when the topic is at the forefront of American consciousness. The fourth chapter will cover the historic and cultural significance of madness in America, as well as the current sociopolitical and -economic circumstances that
have contributed to the current surge in madness narratives and increasingly nuanced portrayal of
characters struggling with some form of mental ailment. The fifth chapter provides an overview of several
common portrayals of madness in American popular culture (primarily fiction and film) through the
centuries while also showing that these portrayals survived and thrived, only slightly changed, in various
hybrid forms in contemporary (late 20th and 21st-century) works of popular culture.

This overview functions as the basis for the third and final part, which covers the presentation of
the theme of madness in the new narrative medium. As previously stated, nine videogames published
between 1995 and the time of writing (2016/2017) will be analyzed in detail, along with a number of
supporting examples, for their portrayal of the theme of madness. These titles, which were chosen in part
for their popularity and impact with the US gaming community and in part for the depth of their
engagement with the theme, draw on at least one of the common portrayals of madness discussed in the
previous chapter, echoing some or many of their narrative conventions, tropes, and symbolism. The
analysis does not seek to make any kind of qualitative argument or even a direct comparison between the
games themselves or with titles from other media; rather, it intends to show how the many narrative
components of each game combine to depict a given type of madness, and how they open up new
perspectives on or avenues for the exploration of a theme that has been an integral part of American
popular culture since the beginning.
2. Things that Go *Beep*: Defining the Videogame

“The video arcade is down the street. Here we just sell small rectangular objects that are called books. Require a little effort on your part and make no b-b-beeps. On your way, please.”

– Mr. Coreander (The NeverEnding Story)⁹

Since its humble beginnings with *Spacewar* in 1962, the medium of videogames has undergone considerable growth and development, often hand in hand with advancements in computing technology, improvements in infrastructure (e.g. Internet access), and the increasing ubiquity of digital devices in everyday life. As of 2017, videogames exist in many different formats (on DVDs, CD-ROMs, as digital downloads and browser applications) and on many different platforms (PCs, tablets, mobile phones, specialized gaming consoles and even digital watches); they have spawned dozens of genres based on their principal play mechanics, camera perspectives, and narrative content, as well as developed an untold number of distinct audiovisual design styles (ranging from tiny pixel sprites to photorealistic animation). They have also mixed and mingled with other media in several ways, emulating and being emulated by them, incorporating and being incorporated by them, as well as sharing the same “space” due to what Mark J. P. Wolf refers to as “technological convergence”¹⁰ (i.e. the shift from analog to digital technology). These developments potentially make it difficult to separate videogames from other media, and render several formerly sensible distinctions obsolete. For example, the physical shape of a medium is no longer a reliable indicator of what kind of medium it is (it is impossible to tell at a glance whether e.g. a DVD contains a movie or a videogame). Moreover, since videogames are perhaps the least uniform medium to date (see below) and many digitized media now contain game-like elements (e.g. interactive movie menus), it is increasingly difficult to draw the line between “videogames” and “not videogames.”

For these and other reasons, before this thesis delves straight into its core subject matter, this chapter will provide an outline of what exactly a videogame is and what exactly is so intriguing about games in general. This discussion is not only intended to clarify the terms and concepts used in subsequent chapters, but also to show how difficult it is to frame videogames in generalized terms, which is especially important given that videogames do not enjoy the most favorable of reputations in public

---


¹⁰ Wolf, “Video Games as American Popular Culture” 127.
discourse and popular consciousness, as the quote at the beginning of this chapter indicates. Indeed, although Mr. Coreander’s laconic assessment is dated from an era just a step beyond the digital stone age, the character’s description of videogames is still a distressingly common image: Videogames are things that go beep – frenetically noisy, obnoxiously colorful, bizarrely entertaining, but ultimately nowhere near as interesting or useful as a good book. Case closed. Or is it?

2.1. Definition Problems

A closer look at the subject at hand reveals what the introductory paragraph has already suggested, namely that things are not quite so simple. In the world of the 21st century, the era of consumer electronics and digital entertainment, plenty of things go beep, but not all of them are videogames. Moreover, due to their complicated history, videogames have a few rather unexpected relatives by association, such as pinball machines, claw cranes, and robotic toys. What a videogame is and where the line between videogames and non-videogames should be drawn are questions which have not yet been answered to complete satisfaction, with many media scholars drawing their own boundaries in the absence of a consensus. This struggle for a definition can be observed especially in early contributions in the field of game studies: In an article from 1991, Charles Bernstein uses the term “videogame” to refer to particular games (e.g. Pac-Man or Pong) as well as the arcade machines used to play them: “The medium of videogames is the CPU – the computer’s central processing unit. Videogames share this medium with PCs. Videogames and PCs are different (hardware) formats of the same medium. Indeed, a videogame is a computer that is set up (dedicated) to play only one program.” This conflation of the physical shell and its contents, namely the game software, may seem strange to modern computer users, since it has become common practice to simply download games and other programs from the formless vastness of the Internet without bothering with cumbersome physical storage, to the point where even the practice of inserting a CD-ROM or DVD to play is starting to seem as alien as using a stack of floppy disks to run a single application. However, there was a time when it made sense to be so indiscriminate: For much of their early history (1970s), videogames were hardwired into special machines, namely the aforementioned arcade cabinets: tall plastic husks which house a monitor, a control panel made up of one or several joysticks, levers and/or buttons.

as well as the game itself, stored on the microchips within. One arcade cabinet could – and still can – only ever play one specific game; thus it made sense to consider them a unit. Other, later works attempt more nuanced distinctions that nevertheless grapple with similar problems: In the 2003 publication *The Video Game Theory Reader*, Mark Wolf and Bernard Perron suggest that it is possible to differentiate between “video games” and “computer games”: “[...] ‘computer games’ would not require any visuals, while ‘video games’ would not require a microprocessor (or whatever one wanted to define as essential for being referred to as a ‘computer’).” According to this definition, computer games are any and all games that employ computers or computer components (microchips, etc.) in some form, but they are not displayed on a monitor. The reason for this rather confusing distinction can once again be found in early videogame history: In this case, the issue can be traced to the falling prices of computer components in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which led toy companies to experiment with creating electronically supported versions of popular board games like *Monopoly*, *Battleship*, or *Clue*. In addition, the earliest videogame consoles (e.g. the 1972 Magnavox Odyssey), which could be connected to the television monitor in order to play videogames at home, did not have CPUs the way modern computers do. The fact that videogames were once hardwired into the machines used to play them (arcade cabinets) also plays a role in their association with the aforementioned robotic toys, gambling machines and carnival games: Toys like the Aibo (a robotic dog), the Furby (a talking fantasy bird) or the Tamagotchi (a little egg-shaped device that serves as the home of an electronic pet) exhibit programmed playful behaviors which have been hardwired into their systems, similar to the aforementioned arcade cabinets. Claw cranes and pinball tables can mainly be found in the amusement arcade, which is home to many a coin-operated slot machine – and videogame arcade cabinets function on the same basic principle: Insert coin, press start.

If the term “videogame” is used to refer to nothing but the game software itself, free of any physical attachments and storage devices, a proper definition is still, at best, subjective. James Newman illustrates some of the principal difficulties by attempting to approach videogames via their most common types, or “genres”: action/adventure, racing, first-person shooter, platform/puzzle, role-playing, strategy/simulation, and sports/beat-'em-ups. This parade of industry jargon, however, offers little insight, and in fact barely even fulfills its role as a classification system. Not only is the terminology mystifying to anyone but the most dedicated of players, it does not draw on uniform criteria: This very

---

13 Wolf and Perron 21.
14 Newman 12.
basic list alone employs game mechanics (e.g. shooting or racing) alongside camera perspectives (e.g. first-person) and extremely broad allusions to themes or player performance (e.g. action and adventure) as defining/identifying features – and it fails to cover the vast number of videogames which liberally and creatively mix and match mechanics, perspectives and themes to create unique play experiences which defy even these nebulous categories. Newman himself quickly discards the classification of genre on these and other grounds, instead opting to use the “embodied experience” of videogame play (i.e. the player embodies certain characters or objects in the game) as one of its defining features.

Another approach to videogames is to try and define them via their most basic common elements, an endeavor which proves similarly difficult. Game designer Geoff Howland lists five “basic” elements which make up videogames, namely graphics, sound, interface, gameplay, and story:

**Graphics:** Any images that are displayed and any effects performed on them. This includes 3D objects, 2D tiles, 2D full-screen shots, Full Motion Video (FMV), statistics, informational overlays and anything else the player will see.

**Sound:** Any music or sound effects that are played during the game. This includes starting music, CD music, MIDI, MOD tracks, Foley effects, environment sounds.

**Interface:** The interface is anything that the player has to use or have direct contact with in order to play the game. […] The interface includes graphics that the player must click on, menu systems that the player must navigate through and game control systems such as how to steer or control the pieces in the game. Half of a game’s “AI” (Artificial Intelligence) is also related to interface.

**Gameplay:** Gameplay is a fuzzy term. It encompasses how much fun a game is, how immersive it is and the length of playability.

**Story:** The game’s story includes any background before the game starts, all information the player gains during the story or when they win and any information they learn about characters in the game.15

Howland’s list, which is written from the perspective of game design, seems straightforward, but its elements are far from central to all, or even the majority of, games. The two elements that could be seen as common to all, namely interface and gameplay, are also those that reveal the least about the nature of videogames – any program has a user interface of some kind, and gameplay is, by Howland’s own admission, “fuzzy,” describing a range of attributes which are themselves hard to define, let alone

---

15 Newman 27.

measure. Graphics, story and sound are, at best, debatable – not to say optional – features. Although sound is now widely used in the form of background music, effects, and voiced dialogue, it grows ever scarcer the further one looks back into the past, to a time before efficient audio encoding and sound equipment. In fact, the Magnavox Odyssey, the very first videogame home console developed by Ralph Baer in 1972, had no sound capability at all, rendering all games played on it effectively silent. Likewise, story is far from a mandatory element (as will be explored in detail in subsequent chapters). Despite the fact that a substantial number of games make storytelling an integral part of their experience, there are just as many games that do not: Any digital rendition of pre-existing card or board games, most sports videogames (e.g. car racing, soccer, etc.) and even early arcade games offer little to nothing in terms of story and characterization. In fact, the classic videogame Pac-Man (1980), which is centered on the navigation of a series of increasingly complex mazes, is revolutionary in that it is one of the first to possess rudimentarily individualized characters. Many other early games such as Donkey Kong (1981), Super Mario (1985) or Sonic the Hedgehog (1991) only possess a very basic plot and little to no character development.

For example, the installment Super Mario World (1990) sporadically peppers its levels with short text boxes to introduce characters and their features, or briefly establish the background story “Welcome! This is Dinosaur Land. In this strange land we find that Princess Toadstool is missing again! Looks like Bowser is at it again!” At first glance, this introduction assumes that the player is familiar with the characters and their struggle, since neither Toadstool nor Bowser are introduced or characterized in depth. A second glance reveals that the skeletal story presupposes more than a familiarity with the world of Super Mario. In fact, it relies on a formula that every player, novice or master, is bound to recognize, since it is a formula that has been a part of storytelling since time immemorial: The hero (in this case, the player character) sets out to vanquish a great evil, thus winning the favor of the heroine, who serves as a love interest. With the help of this formula, the story of Super Mario practically writes itself.

Even graphics, a feature one could think should be the primary characteristic of a videogame, are not universal. The limitations of graphics processor units and storage in the 1970s and 1980s inspired the creation of so-called text adventure games, which use descriptive text instead of images and animations to present the game world to the player. The play mechanics, too, rely on the input of text commands, although some later hybrid games sometimes incorporate rudimentary point-and-click features. The

---

following excerpt illustrates the bare-bones nature of the genre; player input is preceded by the greater-than symbol, followed by the respective command:

West of House
You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front door. There is a small mailbox here.
> examine mailbox
The small mailbox is closed.
> open mailbox
Opening the small mailbox reveals a leaflet.
> get leaflet
Taken.

As this opening passage from the 1980 text adventure *Zork: The Great Underground Empire* demonstrates, the player is placed in an environment which they must slowly explore with the help of simple verb-object commands. If the player enters a command which is nonsensical or cannot be executed, an error message is displayed, often to humorous effect. For example, *Colossal Cave Adventure* responds to the player’s attempt to take on a ferocious dragon unprepared with the sarcastic message, “With what? Your bare hands?” or, when the player attempts to make their character consume inappropriate objects (e.g. “eat door”), by stating, “I think I just lost my appetite.” Many phrases from these early text adventures have since achieved a high recognition value in gaming and hacker culture, like the ominous warning that greets the player in the *Zork* series: “It is pitch black. You are likely to be eaten by a grue.” Unlike other forms of interactive fiction, text adventures offer all the essential explorative and interactive possibilities of graphics-based videogames – depending on the adventure in question, players can collect items, solve puzzles, interact with non-player characters (NPCs), discover and explore various regions, fight battles, or even die, depending on their actions. For instance, should the player choose not to heed the cautionary message in *Zork*, and foolishly venture into the dark without a source of light, they may indeed be beset by a grue and devoured, which results in a game-over. Although some text games have since been retroactively outfitted with simple graphics (e.g. still images) in order to enhance the experience, or have

---

20 *Zork I*. The mysterious monster has since appeared in a number of videogames and pop culture items as a humorous reference; in the horror game *Alan Wake*, the titular protagonist sarcastically remarks on the player’s decision to turn off the lights, “Fine, I’ll just sit here in the dark, maybe get eaten by a grue” (*Alan Wake*, dev. Remedy Entertainment [Xbox 360: Microsoft Game Studios, 2010]).
even evolved into fully graphics-based games in later installments, the fact remains that there exists an 
entire subset of videogames for which graphics in the traditional sense are entirely optional. What 
Howland’s elements exemplify is how difficult it is to discuss videogames in general terms, since they 
come in so many forms and, due to a vast arsenal of digital tools and techniques, their various elements 
like graphics, sound, etc., can be combined into ever newer forms.

Even a straightforward definition which subsumes a wide range of videogame varieties, like the 
one offered by Gonzalo Frasca in his 2001 master thesis, contains its own pitfalls. Frasca describes 
videogames as “any form of computer-based entertainment software, either textual or image based, using 
any electronic platform such as personal computers or consoles and involving one or multiple players in a 
physical or networked environment.”\(^2\) This definition elegantly circumvents any issues that might arise 
from distinctions based on hardware, online or offline play, the number of simultaneous players, as well as 
artistic and design variety, but involuntarily begs the question of what can be considered “entertainment 
software.” In the more than fifteen years since Frasca penned his description, the practice of applying 
game elements and structures to non-game contexts such as marketing, education or job training (known 
by the term “gamification”\(^2\)) has increased substantially, especially in the area of general software design, 
which makes it difficult to draw a line between “entertainment” and “not entertainment.” In fact, 
precursors of this phenomenon can be observed in programs as early as 1992, when the Japanese game 
company Nintendo released a software bundle based on its popular Super Mario franchise. Mario Paint and 
its unofficial spin-off Mario Paint Composer combine the series characters, design elements and even mini- 
games with rudimentary drawing and music composition software, thus deviating from the strict 
functionality of typical application software. Since then, many programs, particularly educational software, 
have made use of game design principles to ensure more user-friendly interfaces and accessibility to lay 
users. For instance, non-professionally oriented game engines (sets of programs and functions for the 
creation of videogames) like RPG Maker and MUGEN allow laypersons to create their own games in a 
simplified, playful manner. RPG Maker combines an uncomplicated scripting language with basic editors 
for certain game components (maps or battles), enabling users to build environments and gameplay


mechanisms by assembling virtual “tiles” and defining basic parameters via menu selections. This setup is a deliberate homage to the pre-3D era of the 1980s and early 1990s, invoking its limited technological capacity and simplistic charm. Similarly, MUGEN’s dual functionality as a playable game and a customizable game engine places it in an ambiguous position. On the one hand, MUGEN is a simple 2D fighting game which places the player in control of a two-dimensional sprite character who is pitted against opponents in a martial arts tournament. On the other hand, MUGEN enables its users to create their own characters, fighting moves and gameplay modes – a feature of which players/programmers often take advantage in order to create “fantasy matches” between their favorite fictional characters, pitting Homer Simpson against Spiderman or Colonel Sanders against Ronald McDonald. This kind of structure and the nostalgic, playful creativity it encourages set both programs apart from professional design software, akin to the difference between a toy toolbox and a life-sized one.

Another gray area is software products which are marketed as games despite their developers’ assertions to the contrary. The Sims series, a type of simulation software that allows players to create, raise, and interact with virtual characters and families, is often referred to as a game. Yet, its designer Will Wright would rather see it described as a “toy” due to the fact that it differs from typical videogame conventions in several areas: The Sims and the majority of its sequels have no pre-defined goals which the player must achieve in order to progress, no winning or losing conditions, and instead encourage the player to experiment freely and create any scenario of their choosing. One can argue that whether The Sims is used as a toy or a game is dependent on the individual player and their purposes; while some players experiment freely, others devote much time to developing elaborate scenarios or try to achieve a specific outcome. For instance, game design student Robin Burkinshaw garnered attention within the gaming community in 2009 when he developed a scenario featuring the characters of a homeless father and his daughter who interact with the wider world of The Sims 3. “Alice and Kev,” as the scenario is named, is chronicled in a series of blog posts over the course of several months, creating an impromptu story full of surprising parallels to real-world homelessness, parental abuse and neglect, and untreated mental illness. Burkinshaw notes that many of the surprising turns in the course of Kev and Alice’s virtual


life occurred when he did not interfere, and instead allowed his Sims to act freely on their predetermined personality traits. Apart from the characters’ dysfunctional family life, they are also placed in relation to a suburban community of (non-player-controlled) Sims who alternately reject, gossip about and help them in sudden bouts of kindness. If Burkinshaw’s experiment demonstrates anything, it is that neither the label “toy” nor that of “game” adequately manages to capture the true flexibility of *The Sims* when placed into the hands of a curious and creative player.

A third ambiguous area is software which is conceived as a professional tool or platform, but slowly becomes associated with games through frequent playful use. One prominent example is *Vocaloid*, a singing synthesizer initially developed by Yamaha Corporation which enables users to generate computerized vocals by supplying lyrics and a melody. *Vocaloid* and its various incarnations have since become favorites among hobby composers, who treat them as a type of digital toy. Their lasting appeal can be explained by the fact that Yamaha and affiliated companies have created humanoid personae for the different synthesizer voices for marketing purposes. When Crypton Future Media released *Hatsune Miku Vocaloid 2* in 2007, the virtual singer persona of Miku – an android girl with long, blue-green hair – quickly captured the imagination of amateur composers, illustrators and animators. Within a short period of time, Miku and several of her “sibling” Vocaloids became the stars of Internet memes, song cycles, fan-produced comics, novels, and actual videogames, some of which achieved such widespread popularity as to be developed into franchises of their own (examples include *Servant of Evil*, a collection of song stories which was adapted into several novels, as well as a serialized manga and stage play, or *Black Rock Shooter*, a music video which re-imagines the character as a fighter in a post-apocalyptic world and which subsequently spawned an animated movie, a television series, and several official videogames). The popularity of *Vocaloid* is further enhanced by the tolerant stance of the software proprietors, who occasionally choose to endorse fan-created character designs or license fan compositions for their series of rhythm videogames, called *Hatsune Miku: Project DIVA*. Although *Vocaloid*, in its original form, remains a voice synthesizer with a range of “serious” applications, it has also become a toy and a storytelling platform due to the enormous creative zeal of its fans. In short, the Internet and fan culture can have a deep and lasting influence on the role and purpose of a given product.

When all these developments are taken into consideration, “entertainment software” becomes a

---

rather ambiguous term in its own right that does not fully succeed in drawing boundaries between videogames and not-videogames. And when one considers the rapid evolution of the medium and the seemingly boundless creativity it encourages in designers and players alike, one has to wonder whether a little ambiguity and a lack of a universal consensus are not appropriate or, in fact, necessary. Videogames have grown, changed and expanded so much over the roughly 50 years since their inception that it seems almost counterproductive to draw a line at this point in time, given how much more diverse the medium is likely to become in the foreseeable future. Hence, Frasca’s definition may well be the most inclusive, and will also be the one which the present work draws on: Videogames are “any form of computer-based entertainment software, either textual or image based, using any electronic platform such as personal computers or consoles and involving one or multiple players in a physical or networked environment.”26 And occasionally, they do go beep.

2.2. The Name Game

The second hurdle in a conversation about videogames is the fact that there currently exists no consensus among researchers on how to refer to them. At least five terms are commonly and sometimes interchangeably used in scholarly works to refer to one and the same subject: In the relatively recent Introduction to Game Studies (2008), Frans Mäyrä consistently uses “digital game,” while Janet Murray alternates between “electronic game” and “computer game” in her seminal work Hamlet on the Holodeck (1997).27 Other well-known scholars like Jesper Juul or Mark J. P. Wolf prefer to use “videogame” for their discussions. Occasionally, the term “console game” also surfaces, mainly in video game journalism and colloquial use. This smorgasbord of terms not only underlines the elusive defining characteristics of the medium, but hints at its rapid evolution and complicated history.

Generally speaking, both “electronic game” and “digital game” are broader descriptors. Wolf traces the use of “electronic game” as far back as the early 1970s, when it was used as a superordinate term for various types of games utilizing electronic components, before the emergence of home consoles gave rise to the more specific “videogame.”28 The distinction between computer and video/console games can be attributed to the divide between the multi-purpose personal computers and the specialized so-

26 Frasca 4.
28 Wolf and Perron 2.
called video entertainment systems,\textsuperscript{29} or home consoles. Depending on the angle of research, these labels are treated as either equal or unequal, inclusive or exclusive, distinct or indistinct, to the point where arguments in favor of one term over all the others almost seem to be a simple matter of preference. The present work will continue to use the term “videogame” throughout and draw no lines between computers, consoles, or any other manner of device or play mechanics. This is partly due to several developments which have gained momentum in the course of the last fifteen years, and partly due to a wish to keep the subject as accessible as possible.

For one, although some scholars still maintain distinctions based on these platforms, this has become less than practical. During the past fifteen to twenty years, in particular, videogames have expanded their reach beyond consoles and PCs: Tablets, mobile phones, and specialized handheld devices all offer their own selections of games. The majority of these devices have online capability as well, offering a myriad of small, easily accessible browser games that do not even have to be installed on, stored on, or otherwise tied to the devices in question. Moreover, long-standing game franchises tend to be spread out across many different types of platforms, partly due to the rapidity with which electronic devices are upgraded and replaced, and partly due to efforts to reach a broader audience. For example, the popular \textit{Final Fantasy} series, one of the most successful and oldest franchises to date, currently encompasses fourteen main titles as well as several sequels and spin-offs. Since its inception in 1987, it has been playable on no less than three generations of consoles produced by different manufacturers, a plethora of handheld devices like the PlayStation Portable or Nintendo DS, mobile phones, PCs and tablet computers like the iPad. The impracticality of maintaining the distinction based on platforms is compounded by the recent tendency towards so-called cross-platform releases: the publication of one and the same videogame for multiple platforms, either simultaneously or near-simultaneously. The practice, which has become quite common during the past ten to fifteen years, ensures greater marketability. Depending on the relationship between developers and publishers, games may even switch platforms in the middle of development due to delays, financial troubles, re-branding or copyright issues.

For another, it stands to reason that game consoles are merely specialized types of computers. If one were to use an extremely technical perspective, the majority of consoles, whether television-based or handheld, contain the same pieces of hardware that define personal computers (i.e. CPUs,\textsuperscript{29} So named upon their introduction to the market in the late 1970s in order to highlight their user-friendliness and signal to customers that they could be easily plugged into the television and used just like a VHS recorder.)
microprocessors, graphics and sound chips, etc.). Although the very first game console, the 1972 Magnavox Odyssey, was not capable of performing actions typical of computers such as calculations or storing data and did not possess a CPU, subsequent consoles grew steadily more sophisticated, and came to many of the parts and functions one would consider to be exclusive to computers. In fact, the current generation of consoles is even more similar to personal computers in their hardware and functionality. The majority of them include browsers, online shopping services, chat functions, the ability to create social media profiles or share content with other users, storage for photos, videos and music files, and are capable of playing CDs or DVDs, effectively allowing them to stand in for a stereo system, slide projector or movie player. In this sense, the gap between the specialized game platforms and the platforms which happen to be capable of playing games has become almost negligibly minor from the standpoint of functionality. In addition, the growing popularity of motion-based input devices like the Wii-mote or Kinect raises the question of the degree to which games are still played on a computer or console in the strictest sense. Although input devices like the plastic imitation guitars for the music game Guitar Hero, the pressure-sensitive mats used for rhythm games like Dance Dance Revolution or microphones for karaoke games are still connected to a computer/console in some manner, they put greater distance between the player and their platform of choice, in a spatial as well as a physical sense (e.g. motion-sensing technology and infrared sensors can recognize inputs from a room away, players are required to use their entire body to issue commands). This increase in distance and variety of input methods (which are often more organic than keyboard strokes and mouse clicks) inevitably alters the relationship between users and their devices, the speed and efficiency with which they adapt to new rules and gameplay mechanisms, and the range of activities/tasks for which the devices are used. This, in turn, opens up new possibilities for the creation of games.

Given these factors, the choice of terminology ultimately does become a matter of preference. Several publications and academic conferences have begun to use “digital games” as an umbrella term for any manner of electronic entertainment, regardless of platform, history, or genre, in an attempt to do away

---

**Incidentally, the same changes can be observed in the areas of work and the creative arts as more companies and research institutes seek to develop alternative input methods for and integration of traditional electronic devices to facilitate more organic interactions between humans and computers. Examples include the much-publicized Google Glass, a wearable computer with an optical head-mounted display, controlled by the user’s voice and eye-motions, or the iSphere developed at the MIT Media Laboratory, a dodecahedral device capable of interpreting hand positions to aid in 3D modeling. Cf. Chia-Hsun Lee, Yuchang Hu, and Ted Selker, “iSphere: A Free-Hand 3D Modeling Interface,” International Journal of Architectural Computing 4.1 (2006): 19-31; cf. Google Glass, 31 Aug. 2017 <http://www.google.com/glass/start/>.
with old dichotomies. However, “videogame” is still one of the most widely used and most evocative terms, especially outside of scholarly circles. If Mr. Coreander’s statement from the beginning of this chapter is any indication, it is that “videogame” has become more than just another name – it evokes specific associations, imagery, attitudes and concerns. It is a moniker used by game journalists, critics and enthusiasts, a descriptor and a buzzword in the mainstream media, among parents and educators, in legislative debates and other political controversies – in other words, it carries the most weight in a positive as well as in a negative sense. Although the compound spelling chosen here may not fit the grammatical pattern set by expressions like “ball game” or “card game,” “videogame” has become a memetic mutation which can be used to refer to the whole of the medium, circumventing associations with genre or platform.

2.3. Computers and the Adaptability of Games

“The only legitimate use of a computer is to play games.”31 At first glance, this claim by programmer and computer pioneer Eugene Jarvis is as bold as it seems obvious; after all, Jarvis is best known for his work on some of the oldest and most successful videogames of the distant arcade era, such as Defender (1980), Stargate (1981) and Robotron (1982) – it is hardly surprising that a videogame designer would think so highly of his craft. Yet, this proclamation encapsulates a phenomenon which has preoccupied modern game scholars for decades: the fact that games and computers are suited to one another like the electronic equivalents of peanut butter and jelly. Jesper Juul states that “[t]here appears to be a basic affinity between games and computers: Like the printing press and cinema have historically promoted and enabled new kinds of storytelling, computers work as enablers of games, letting us play old games in new ways, and allowing for new types of games that would previously not have been possible,”32 and suggests that games possess special characteristics that make them exceptionally well-suited to the digitization. This certainly seems to be the case given that even games which are hundreds, if not thousands, of years old – like chess, mahjong and backgammon – can be transposed onto a computer screen with virtually no changes to their structure or presentation. Frans Mäyrä similarly states that “digital games remediate activities or forms of

32 Juul 5.
representation that have originally appeared elsewhere” and suggests that there must be features common
to all games which allow for this remediation.33

2.3.1. Common Elements of Games?
The search for common elements to a cluster of activities which are often described as “cultural
universals” and can look back on a history of several thousand years at the very least seems like a quest
with a terribly low chance of success. However, a quick look at some of the most influential publications
on the subject of games reveals that common elements are, in fact, rather more numerous than one might
suspect: Depending on the angle of research, a considerable range of characteristics can be identified
and/or prioritized. Although scholarly writing on the subject of games predates modern game studies by
quite a margin, the majority of pre-20th-century musings were focused on their practical uses and the
purpose of their existence: For example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau explores the potential of games in
children’s education, intellectual development and the formation of moral integrity in Emile (1762),35
Friedrich Schiller allots a central role to games in his musings on aesthetics and creativity presented in On
the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters (1793), in which he stipulates that through a balance
between deprivation and overindulgence, the human soul develops the “play drive,” which compels it to
seek out beauty and engage in creative pursuits,36 and the biologist Herbert Spencer seeks to uncover the
physiological conditions of play behavior and the evolutionary purpose of games in animals as well as
humans (1873).37 One of the very first identifications of features common to all games comes from the

33 Mäyrä 32. Italics in original.
34 Mäyrä 37.
35 Among other things, Rousseau notably suggests that access to interesting and varied games will prevent children from
falling prey to vices like gambling, promiscuity and alcoholism. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emile: or On Education, trans. Barbara
36 Schiller famously states that “[...] man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only
fully a human being when he plays,” ascribing to playful urges a transcendental quality that is necessary for the production of art.
fact, Spencer develops his arguments on the basis of Schiller’s “play drive,” and goes so far as to unite Schiller’s theory of art and
aesthetics with his own examination of biological play impulses. Spencer argues that physical play activity (which has its roots in
the “lower” struggle for survival) and intellectual or spiritual play activity (which has its roots in the “higher” social evolution)
share the same characteristics, as they are “carried on for the sake of immediate gratifications derived, without reference to
ulterior benefits; and to such higher powers, aesthetic products yield these substituted activities, as games yield them to various
lower powers” (Spencer 632).
German psychologist Karl Groos at the turn of the 20th century. In *The Play of Man* (1901), Groos examines the play behavior and games of human beings, and observes that “enjoyment, repetition, and pretence” are central features of human play, and can be found even in certain rituals like courtship. However, it is the field of cultural history which offers the first truly detailed insight into the workings of games. In 1938, the Dutch anthropologist and historian Johan Huizinga published his seminal work *Homo Ludens* (lit. “the playing human”), in which he explores games as progenitors of cultural rituals and as a means for human expression. Huizinga is one of the first to grapple with the limits of experimental science in the study of games, as he feels there is a certain indefinable, if not downright ineffable, character to them. In a step away from the until then dominant Darwinian school of thought, which relegates play to a purely functional role in society, Huizinga is of the opinion that there is no ready scientific explanation for why an activity for purposes such as stress relief, consumption of surplus energy or training to acquire certain skills should be fun. The fact that human beings can manage to lose themselves in a game, that they can experience such frenzied passion, defies the capacity of analytical science. Throughout *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga seeks to distinguish games from other human activities, and inadvertently develops one of the cornerstones of modern (video-)game theory when he writes, “All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course.” Huizinga calls this clearly demarcated, walled-off space “the magic circle,” in reference to the symbols drawn on the ground during mystic or religious rituals, and suggests that varieties of it can be found in many avenues of human life:

The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.

Huizinga identifies “rules” as perhaps the most important feature of games, since rules determine the makeup of the “temporary world” of the game: Anyone who blatantly refuses to play by the rules “shatters the play-world itself” by destroying the source of its integrity, the very thing which allows it to

---


40 Huizinga 10.

41 Huizinga 10-11.

42 Huizinga 10.
temporarily become manifest.\textsuperscript{43}

The concept of a magic circle which surrounds the “act apart” survives in Roger Caillois’s work \textit{Man, Play and Games} (1961), in which he further develops Huizinga’s ideas but seeks to establish a boundary between games and most of the other activities (e.g. religious rituals) which Huizinga understands to be “playful.” Caillois likewise describes games as separate from everyday tasks in both space and time, but takes care to define them as non-obligatory activities (unlike more serious rituals, which carry a certain element of obligation). Further, Caillois observes that games are governed by rules, that their outcome rests on player initiative, and that they are “unproductive,” meaning that no goods are produced, though goods may change hands between players in the form of prizes (e.g. during gambling).\textsuperscript{44} Whereas Huizinga views competition as one of the key ingredients of play,\textsuperscript{45} Caillois considers competition a feature of only certain kinds of games, and develops a rudimentary typology of games based on their dominant characteristic: “agôn” for competitive games (e.g. sports like soccer or board games), “alea” for games of chance (e.g. card games, roulette), “mimicry” for role-playing (e.g. \textit{Cops and Robbers} or modern live-action role-play [LARP]\textsuperscript{46}, and “ilinx” for games that affect perception (e.g. games that rely on sensory deprivation).\textsuperscript{47} However, he acknowledges that games may also appear in hybrid forms, e.g. through a combination of skill with a certain element of chance. Furthermore, Caillois introduces the idea of “turbulence,” meaning that the rules of a game allow the player(s) a greater or lesser amount of freedom in their behavior and style of play. He names the complete freedom “paidia” (from the root of the Greek word for “child”) and calls the gratuitous introduction of rules and restrictions “ludus,” stating that games may be placed in a continuum between these two extremes according to their degree of freedom or rule-based constraints.\textsuperscript{48}

With the slow advent of game studies as an independent field of research, definitions of games begin to gravitate towards an agreement on certain traits. For instance, Bernard Suits chooses to locate the

\textsuperscript{43} Huizinga 11.


\textsuperscript{45} Huizinga 47.

\textsuperscript{46} A LARP is a type of role-play inspired by genre fiction, particularly “sword & sorcery” and similar types of fantasy literature. Participants dress up in costume and physically act out roles according to a previously agreed-upon scenario.

\textsuperscript{47} Caillois 12.

\textsuperscript{48} Caillois 27. This acknowledgement of a hybridity of game forms and a continuum of freedom and restriction has become especially relevant in the context of videogames, where it is not only increasingly difficult to distinguish genres according to the elements in a game, but hard to find a consensus on how much freedom or restriction a given game ought to provide in order to create an enjoyable experience.
defining characteristic of a game in its goal, which may only be achieved by following a certain set of rules, regardless of whether other means of achieving the goal might be more efficient. Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, who devoted his research to the analysis of rituals and symbols, ascribes a “threshold character” to games, placing them between reality and complete unreality. In his essay “Liminal to Liminaloid,” Turner deals with this threshold character via the two concepts of liminality and liminoidity. In an allusion to folklorist Arnold van Gennep’s *The Rites of Passage* (1909), liminality is described as a state with a sense of social ambiguity, a temporary in-between existence. This particularly applies to rituals like rites of passage, which involve a change in the social status of their participants, for example a transition from childhood to adulthood. Liminality, in turn, is used to refer to cultural performances with a threshold-like quality, such as stage plays and leisure activities. Turner sees the liminal as mainly present in tribal and pre-agricultural societies, whereas the liminoid is more present in feudal and industrial societies. The main difference between the two is that liminal phenomena are collective, tied to biological, social or calendrical patterns, whereas liminoid phenomena are, for the most part, individual creations associated with specific people or groups. They are not tied to cycles, but are continually produced even if they are tied to restricted places and times associated with “leisure.” Turner defines games as liminoid phenomena, stating that they are generally seen as optional activities, and, in contrast to tribal rituals, can be selectively marketed and bought, e.g. by paying money for equipment, entry fees, or rent of a particular play space (e.g. a golf course). Liminal processes are capable of criticizing or even challenging established social conventions. Turner’s assertion of the quasi-liminal status of games bears a resemblance to Huizinga’s concept of the magic circle, but grants sociocultural agency to games and other liminoid phenomena: Games can be integrated into a society, yet can run parallel or even contrary to its accepted norms and standards. Marshall McLuhan goes a step further in *Understanding Media* by locating the principal power of games in their ability to relieve tensions on a societal/cultural scale: “Games are popular art, collective, social reactions to the main drive or action of any culture. Games, like institutions, are extensions of social man and of the body politic, as technologies are extensions of the animal

---


51 V. Turner 53-55.

52 V. Turner 54-55.
organism.” He describes them as “counter-irritants,” which, due to their non-mandatory status, are capable of counteracting the stresses of everyday life and social constraints. Play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith likewise emphasizes the sociocultural functions of games. By categorizing games according to how “public” or “private” they are, Sutton-Smith not only develops a rudimentary nomenclature for types of play activities/games (ranging from “subjective play,” which includes things like personal daydreams, and “solitary play,” which includes single-person hobbies, to “contests,” which include all manner of public sports competitions), but also notes that games possess a kind of power that can be gleaned from the way they are talked about and framed in a particular society or culture. Culturally speaking, not all games are equal, as “play’s supposed frivolity may itself be a mask for play’s use in more widespread systems for denigrating the play of other groups, as has been done characteristically throughout history by those of higher status against the recreations of those of lower status.”

2.3.2. The Focus on Rules, and Its Problems

An interesting feature of most definitions of games is that they are explicitly or implicitly concerned with rules. For example, Turner’s characterization of liminoid phenomena as processes which are able to subvert, criticize or otherwise able to toy with social order implies that games employ rules that run counter to or otherwise differ from the rules of everyday society. Sutton-Smith’s distinction between private and public games likewise implies that there must be at least one set of rules (e.g. who or how many players may join, or the location of play) that determines whether a game is private or public. Even more noteworthy is that publications on videogame design rather consistently focus on the establishment of rules, as well. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman’s 2004 publication on the subject devotes a full third of its length to the functions of game rules and phenomena related to the interaction between rules, the players, and other structures of a game. Using the example of Tic Tac Toe, they note that rules do not encapsulate the play experience, the culture or history of games, but that rules ensure that players are always playing the exact same game: “Whether played in front of a computer terminal or scratched in the sand of a beach, every game of Tic Tac Toe shares the same basic formal identity. In this sense, rules are the

54 McLuhan, Understanding Media 208.
56 Sutton-Smith 8.
57 Sutton-Smith 9.
deep structure of a game from which all real-world instances of the game’s play are derived.” In *Half Real* (2005), Jesper Juul develops the “classic game model,” so named because it is “classic in the sense that it is the way games traditionally have been constructed,” with the aim of clarifying the relationship between videogames and other games. By reviewing older definitions, Juul does away with mere cosmetic distinctions and brings the understanding of games into the 21st century. He eventually reduces all games to six common defining features:

1. **Rules**: Games are rule-based.
2. **Variable, quantifiable outcome**: Games have variable, quantifiable outcomes.
3. **Valorization of outcome**: The different potential outcomes of the game are assigned different values, some positive and some negative.
4. **Player effort**: The player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome.
5. **Player attachment to outcome**: The player is emotionally attached to the outcome of the game in the sense that a player will be winner [sic] and “happy” in case of a positive outcome, but a loser and “unhappy” in case of a negative outcome.
6. **Negotiable consequences**: The same game [set of rules] can be played with or without real-life consequences.

This approach to games removes many elements of earlier definitions, such as Roger Caillois’s criterion of games as a voluntary activity. Juul considers the human urge to play too complex for a simple black-and-white assessment, and mentions that social pressure may well play a role in a person’s decision to join a game. Since he makes a point to include videogames in his model, which tend to alter or circumvent criteria used for traditional game definitions, Juul rejects Bernard Suits’s definition of the “less efficient means” because it entails other, more applicable features, but is not in itself an applicable condition. As mentioned above, Suits is of the opinion that game rules require players to use “less efficient means” to reach the goal – for instance, the rules of soccer explicitly forbid the use of hands by players other than the goalkeeper, even though the additional use of one’s hands might be more efficient for scoring points. However, according to Juul, this criterion is simply not applicable to videogames, as their players are already using the most efficient means to succeed. For instance, a game of *Super Mario*, which allows the

---

59 Juul 23.
60 Juul 36; italics in original.
61 Juul 31.
62 Juul 34.
player to utilize jumping and flying to navigate an obstacle course, is already implementing the most direct and uncomplicated methods for avoiding impediments and pitfalls. The only ways in which videogames might become even more efficient is if they were created or hacked by the players. It stands to reason, however, that more complex videogames do indeed use less efficient means, on account of game designers either deliberately setting up events to be as complicated as possible or not being able to calculate for all forms of player innovation. An example can be found in *Final Fantasy VIII*, a game that allows the player to explore various locations in order to advance the plot. One such location is a sewer network which the player must navigate to reach a meeting point – however, this sewer network is a veritable maze of locked gates, dead ends, and one-way routes. Despite the fact that the player is armed with magic spells and weapons, they cannot break the gates, cannot leap across gaps in the walkways, or dislocate maintenance ladders from the wall to create makeshift bridges wherever they please. As such, navigating the sewers in *Final Fantasy VIII* is indeed less efficient than it could be, and purposely so. Nevertheless, Juul’s observation is still accurate since “less efficient means” are not a mandatory characteristic of videogames, and do, in fact, heavily depend on genre and objectives.

Juul’s classic game model presents one of the most clear-cut and comprehensive sets of criteria for games analysis, while acknowledging and including videogames. It explains why games lend themselves to being adapted for use on a computer, a quality which Juul describes as “transmedial,” a term borrowed from narratology concerning the movement of stories between different mediums, for instance from novel to film. The transmediality of games is not found in the physical objects used to play them, or the places in which they may be played, but rather in the fact that they are comprised of clear-cut rules – rules which can be upheld and “remembered” by computers, which operate on sets of well-defined rules themselves. However, Juul firmly states that the classic game model is only useful for specific purposes, namely for providing a rudimentary description of the field, and for outlining the relationship between games and computers; it cannot provide an explanation of game variations or why games are enjoyable – something that, as vastly different as their approaches might be, brings the analysis of games full circle and back to Johan Huizinga, whose statements regarding the certain ineffable quality of fun still ring true.

---

63 Juul 34.
64 *Final Fantasy VIII*, dev. Square (PlayStation: Square Electronic Arts, 1999).
65 Juul 48.
66 Juul 54.
almost fifty years later.

None of this is to say that certain aspects of older definitions do not still survive in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, or that they do not possess considerable relevance in relation to videogames. For example, Johan Huizinga’s magic circle has become an important concept in the research on virtual worlds, particularly MMORPGs.\textsuperscript{67} The current understanding of the magic circle is that of an invisible, permeable membrane that simultaneously protects the virtual world and its fictionality from the real world, with its real laws and customs (e.g. in the real world, theft is a criminal act, but in the virtual world, it may be a play mechanic or non-offensive act). Yet, this imaginary membrane does not seal off the play world completely: Players never enter the virtual world of a videogame as blank slates; rather, they bring with them certain assumptions, knowledge, beliefs, desires and attitudes which alter their play experience, and may exit the magic circle with new or altered beliefs, experiences, knowledge, etc.\textsuperscript{68} Likewise, McLuhan’s understanding of games as reactions to cultural/political shifts and as tools to help humans adjust to society’s demands, as well as Sutton-Smith’s theories on the various rhetorics of play, becomes important in the context of public discourse about videogames and the numerous efforts to regulate them on the legal level, as e.g. the 2010 case of \textit{Schwarzenegger v. the Entertainment Merchants Association} before the US Supreme Court shows.\textsuperscript{69} This high-profile lawsuit (and the most recent at the time of writing) sought to determine whether videogames with violent content should be treated like pornography in terms of legislation and criminal prosecution.\textsuperscript{70} Although its success would have made the sale of games with violent content to underage customers illegal, concerns were voiced that such a broad and inefficiently formulated law based on the

\textsuperscript{67} Acronym for Massive(ly) Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game, which belongs to the wider family of MMOs (Massive[ly] Multiplayer Online Games). The term is used to refer to games played over a network (usually the Internet) and which connect anywhere between thousands and hundreds of thousands of players, all of whom are capable of interacting with one another in real time, e.g. by forming alliances. Examples of popular MMOs are \textit{World of Warcraft}, \textit{EVE Online}, \textit{EverQuest}, and \textit{Aion}, to name only a few.


\textsuperscript{70} It should be noted that the videogame industry, much like the film industry, already self-regulates the sale of certain content to minors. In the US, the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) assigns age ratings to videogames based on their content and places specific labels for potentially objectionable material on the cover (e.g. depiction of drug use, coarse language, extreme violence or sexual situations). Electronics retailers typically demand to see identification for the sale of games rated M (mature, +17 years of age) or AO (adult only, +18 years of age). Similar self-regulation exists in Europe, where the International Software Federation of Europe (ISFE) maintains the PEGI rating system (Pan European Game Information), which likewise includes age recommendations and content labels. Certain countries like Austria and the UK have adopted the PEGI system into law, meaning that games cannot be sold without a PEGI rating.
contested guidelines of the Miller Test, a decades-old collection of rather arbitrary guidelines for determining whether a particular work is “obscene,” would lead to equally arbitrary sanctions against an entire medium, ultimately stifling its creativity and freedom of expression. Details of the cultural climate and the motivations surrounding said regulatory efforts will be discussed in Chapter 3; for now, what these efforts illustrate is that videogames (as well as games in general) are embedded in and affected by public discourse and ever-shifting attitudes towards them. Indeed, they themselves are capable of shaping said discourse to a certain degree, e.g. through their presentation, themes, the audience they court, etc.

In addition, an over-reliance on formal criteria when trying to understand (video)games on a broad scale harbors certain risks, some of which emerge in Juul’s own graphical representation of the relationship between games and other “game-like” activities, created through the application of his classic game model:

![Diagram of the Classic Game Model](image)

**Fig. 1:** “The Classic Game Model,” in Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Videogames between Real Rules and Fictitious Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2005) 44.

Although this model is useful for showing the extent and degree to which “pure” games and game-like activities resemble each other based on the characteristics mentioned above (rules, player effort, outcome, etc.), the model exposes its flaws when the various activities Juul cites are placed in their common, real-
world contexts. In Juul’s graphical representation, “games” rest at the center of three concentric circles, since they fulfill all six formal criteria mentioned above. They are surrounded by a second, more porous sphere of borderline cases – among them chance gambles (which require no player effort) and open-ended simulations (which have no predefined win/lose conditions). The outermost sphere possesses no visible borders, and consists of activities that Juul’s definition classifies as “not games,” such as free-form play, pastimes like ring-a-ring o’ roses, as well as, surprisingly, traffic and warfare. What does the systematic movement of persons and vehicles or, more importantly, large-scale armed combat, have to do with the likes of chess, poker or soccer, or even a videogame adaptation of traffic/warfare? When viewed through the lens of Juul’s formal criteria, they share certain characteristics: All are governed by rules, all demand some form of effort on the part of the participants, the participants presumably care about the outcome (e.g. making it from point A to point B without obstruction and coming to harm), etc. What separates traffic and warfare from “true” games is, according to Juul, the fact that their consequences are “non-negotiable,” meaning that they are always inescapably real. Formally speaking, traffic, warfare, and, in fact, most other rule-based human activities appear to be incredibly similar to games, if not for their non-negotiable consequences. Of course, this association does not hold up when these activities are considered in their proper real-world contexts. In fact, even the formal association can be considered fallacious: These two incredibly serious activities are not at all game-like, but rather possess characteristics – rules which define and restrict the behavior of the participants, outcomes and efforts tied to these rules, etc. – which allow them to be adapted into a game format with relative ease.

If anything can be taken away from the debate on how to define games, video- or otherwise, and the difficulty in establishing universal criteria for such a definition, is that games are clearly a case of the whole being more than the sum of its parts. Even very precise and careful definitions can easily crumble when applied to contexts for which they were not designed, or expose their limits sooner or later as human creativity pushes the boundaries of games further and further and innovation experiments even with the most iron-clad of criteria. Especially computers possess the means to turn practically any activity or task into a game, since they are capable of virtually recreating or conjuring any place, prop, time period, or situation imaginable. For example, it is next to impossible to turn real-world farming into a game (beyond, perhaps, introducing a fruit-picking competition come harvest time), but a computer can easily simulate an entire year of growth cycles and farm labor, and, with the right mechanics (e.g. points scores,
additional rules and goals), turn the task of running a farm into a game. Some videogames contain chance-based forms of play or chance-like elements (e.g. procedural generation of virtual environments and enemies), monetization efforts have led to the inclusion of gambling mechanisms such as betting in certain types of games (particularly on the highly competitive mobile games/apps market), and certain videogames even beg the question of how far the definition of seemingly obvious requirements like “player effort” can be stretched (e.g. the rise of so-called “clicker games” or “idle games,” which require the participants to repeatedly perform simple clicking motions or set parameters which allow the game to “play itself” over certain periods of time without any input). Indeed, with only a modicum of hyperbole, the most fitting answer to the question of, “What is a game?” seems to be, “Almost anything – provided you have a computer.”

2.4. A Sudden Interest? (Video-)Game Studies as a 21st-Century Phenomenon

“Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing,” Huizinga states in the opening chapter of *Homo Ludens*. Of course, this declaration inadvertently invites the question of why it has taken so long for games to garner an academic interest, and even longer to become the subject of an organized field of study. As mentioned previously, although investigations into the meaning and purpose of games began to emerge much earlier, the academic discipline of game studies was only founded in the second half of the 20th century. One of the most banal reasons that can be offered for the lack of organized study lies in the very nature of games, their direct or indirect association with concepts like fun, triviality, childishness and simplicity. 71 However, this association is hardly the only reason for the belated interest.

One phenomenon that certainly plays a role is the increasing industrialization of Western society in the 19th century, which brought about a division of daily life into “work time,” reserved for productive tasks, and “leisure time,” reserved for personal enjoyment and recreation. Historian Edward Thompson postulates that the growth of an industrialized society entailed a fundamental shift in the measurement of time, namely the application of the concept of monetary value to the passage of time. By chronicling

---

71 Oddly enough, this attitude can still be felt in the study of videogames today, which, despite their widespread popularity and influence, have only recently begun to attract more attention among scholars. James Newman points out that apart from psychological surveys meant to investigate the potential effects of games on the players (usually limited to children and teenagers), comparatively little attention is paid to other aspects, citing a misconception of videogames as “low art” and “a children’s medium” as two reasons for this neglect (Newman 5).
different accounts in literary and sociopolitical discourse from the Middle Ages to the 20th century, Thompson demonstrates the growing prevalence of mechanical time over task-specific time. Texts from the 14th century onwards indicate the increasing significance of clocks in the human awareness of time (with regard to concepts such as mortality), as well as the application of a clock-based structure to daily life that is supported by the emergence of Calvinism and Puritanism, which emphasized industriousness and efficiency. This, so Thompson, presents a contrast to the task-based structure prevalent in non-industrialized societies, whose perception is based on the time certain tasks take to complete (e.g. “a rice-cooking”) or the points of the day at which various chores are best completed. The European shift from a pre-industrial task-based awareness of time to the industrial clock-based awareness influenced the structuring of leisure as well due to the widening gap between the spheres of “work” and “life.” This development, hastened by urbanization and the concept of “employment” in the Industrial Age, leads to a new understanding of leisure and its related activities (e.g. idle conversation, social relations) as a segment of life removed from work from the perspective of the employee, whereas the employer measures their profits according to the time spent at work, rather than the value of the tasks performed. As Thompson states, “Time is now currency: it is not passed, but spent.” If time is money, as the old saying goes, then its value in- or decreases depending on how productive an activity is judged to be. Hence, how leisure is spent becomes a question of how well it is spent, which entails a growing interest in the kinds of pastimes involved.

Another reason for the sudden increase in attention paid to games is the changes that resulted from the social upheavals in the wake of the First and Second World Wars. These changes are largely responsible for the shift of leisure activities from small-scale pastimes to global, billion-dollar business ventures spanning the production of toys, games, sporting equipment and facilities, tourism and entertainment. This period saw the collapse of the Victorian family model, the entrance of women into the workforce, the expansion of the tertiary sector, as well as the rise of a wealthier, well-educated middle class with ever greater amounts of leisure time at its disposal. These changes have led several sociologists to speak of the creation of a “civilization of leisure” or “age of leisure” in the 20th century to denote the

73 E. P. Thompson 58.
74 E. P. Thompson 61.
large-scale shifts in the structure of daily life. Jonathan Gershuny traces a steady reduction of paid working hours in Anglophone countries during the period between 1940 and 1980, among them the USA, Canada, and Great Britain. Although individual studies suggest that this downward trend has since reversed, Gershuny argues that it is difficult to obtain unambiguous data on the subject due to the complexity of factors involved, such as the in- or exclusion of unpaid labor, shifting occupational standards and gender differences with regard to payment and employment. In general, however, it can be said that the establishment of regular working hours and fixed income, the integration of women into the labor force, and the introduction of social welfare all contributed to a climate in which leisure time came to play a central role in daily life. Due to technological inventions and discoveries, new and cheap forms of mass entertainment like radio and cinema began to arise – for example, by 1908, more than 8,000 nickelodeons had opened their doors in the US alone, with roughly two million visitors per day. In connection with sports, Chris Gratton and Peter Taylor speak of a “recreation explosion” in Great Britain during the 1960s and 1970s, pointing to the unprecedented governmental involvement in the creation and maintenance of outdoor and indoor sporting facilities. James Heilbrun and Charles Gray use the term “cultural boom” to describe a similar rise in leisure spending in the US after the end of World War II by examining, among other things, the sales of tickets for spectator entertainment like film, the performing arts, and sports. These changes also affected the position of children and teenagers in the social framework. The extension of the mandatory schooling period, the enforcement of child labor laws and the increase in youth income in the 1960s granted young people previously unheard-of freedom. At the same time, the segmentation of the market and the growing focus on tailored products and target-group orientated advertising led to the recognition of adolescents as a separate socioeconomic group with its own spending power. In the post-war era, the consumption of particular music, entertainment, hobbies, food and clothing became a method of expression for young people, a way to establish their identity and express their affiliation with particular sub-cultures. The desire for such symbols of affiliation and identity even led to the creation of a post-war import culture among young people of different ethnic backgrounds.

80 Alan France, Understanding Youth in Late Modernity (New York: Open UP, 2007) 117.
and nationalities. Educational scientist Jürgen Zinnecker aptly describes the allure of and identification with the foreign:

The Other can symbolically be brought to one’s home country. Popular culture lives off this process. Via the music scene, reggae feeling may be experienced between Jamaica and London since the 1960s, and in the 1990s, one identifies with hip hop and rap by African American ghetto gangs along the American West and East Coast. [...] Brand jeans, T-shirts and plastic bags with “correct” labels and Western singles and cassettes were highly sought after in the (south)Eastern European region between Poland and Romania.81

From these examples, it becomes apparent that leisure has grown into highly diversified, extremely lucrative global industry with far-reaching social implications among its different consumer groups. This shift in the role and understanding of leisure in Western culture partly serves to explain the growing scientific interest in games, yet, the view of leisure as a mere commodity, as a product to be marketed, bought and sold, creates an overly materialistic, vaguely dystopian impression.

Admittedly, the economic value of games is difficult to set aside. Videogames in particular have become one of the most lucrative branches of the global entertainment industry, which could be considered reason enough to study them. However, there is a third, less obvious factor whose influence is rather easily forgotten, not least because it remains somewhat controversial: the relationship between games and artistic expression. The 20th century marks the beginning of several movements in art, music, and literature with a highly experimental—not to say playful—character, seeking to break with existing conventions and to push the boundaries of the traditional understanding of art. Playing games becomes acceptable as part of the artistic exploration or the building of philosophical theses. For instance, the Surrealist painters of the 1920s introduced the cadavre exquis to their creative process, an art game that was played in coffee houses and consisted of various artists contributing to the same picture, only aware of its general theme but not what their fellow artists had drawn or would draw. André Breton, one of the founders of the Surrealist movement, states that the game of the exquisite corpse resulted from a general desire for amusement among artist friends, but eventually grew to be an inspiring and enriching collective

experience despite being scorned by critics for its supposed immaturity.\textsuperscript{82} Michael Thomas also links the shifting perception of games to the efforts of Modernism, stating that its pursuit of unconventional forms of art led to the consideration of games as an art form. Thomas traces this understanding back to Dadaist painter Marcel Duchamp and multimedia artist Öyvind Fahlström, who deliberately elevated games to artistic objects or used games as ways of approaching art. For instance, Duchamp found himself fascinated by the motions produced when playing a game of chess, and repeatedly emphasized their aesthetic quality: “In chess there are some extremely beautiful things in the domain of movement, but not in the visual domain. It’s the imagining of the movement or the gesture that makes the beauty in this case.”\textsuperscript{83} This paved the way for the movement of game art in the 1960s and 1970s, wherein painters, sculptors and musicians further pursued the game as an art form, such as American sculptor Ernest Trova, who invented the \textit{Spinning Man Game}. According to Thomas, “[...] the player earns points in order symbolically to transcend philosophy, art and being – to finally reach ‘beyond’. The player gains these points by spinning a spinner in the shape of Trova’s falling man silhouette. Individuality, prudence and rationality all add points while hysteria and moral bankruptcy subtract points.”\textsuperscript{84} Although written in 1988, a time when computers were only just beginning to play a role as tools for artistic expression, Thomas predicts them to become one of the most powerful resources for the creation of game art and art games:

In the past, computer art has been used mainly to create static images and animations, but with the growing sophistication of computer systems more attention is being paid to systemization and simulation. The game as art has the potential of becoming an accepted fine-art form, and yet also shows promise as a folk-art form. [...] As more people learn how to program, more can invent their own games.\textsuperscript{85}

Indeed, the new millennium has seen the emergence of “game art,” a sub-genre of new media art whose members look to videogames, augmented reality and computer simulations to create artworks. Despite its roots, game art is not limited to the digital realm or even by default created with the aid of a computer; rather, its artists use a variety of media and techniques ranging from sculpting and traditional painting to


\textsuperscript{84} M. J. Thomas 422.

\textsuperscript{85} M. J. Thomas 423.
the modification of software and videogames, and frequently combine these different techniques to create their installations, which are meant to play with, explore and reflect upon the influence of computer technology. Since its inception, game art has become the centerpiece of several successful organizations and exhibits, such as the Eyebeam Art + Technology Center in New York City, the GABIT Game Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as well as numerous fashion and design studios which are dedicated to creating fusions of games and art. Apart from pushing the boundaries between art and technology, games and reality, game art also provides a new perspective on the traditional relationship between the artist and his or her audience. Unlike traditional artworks, which are generally intended for and put on display, separated from its admirers by glass walls, protective fences of velvet cords, or simply an implicit understanding of “look, but don’t touch,” game art frequently has much more in common with the so-called augmented artifacts of interactive museum exhibits. Game art installations are generally designed to be touched, traversed, and experienced through multiple senses, traits which they share with their digital inspirations.

Taken together, these three factors – the Western reconceptualization of time and leisure, the considerable socioeconomic changes triggered in the first half of the 20th century, and fresh, playful perspectives on the meaning and purpose of creativity and the arts – make apparent the sudden need to understand games better and devote time to their serious academic study. The medium of the videogame has played a considerable part in bringing attention to this need: Not only has it spawned an immensely lucrative industry that is growing exponentially each year (see 3), it is a medium with near limitless potential for artistic expression due to the possibilities of the 0s and 1s that make up computer technology, it offers new spaces for social interaction, and acts as a vehicle for technological innovation (e.g. programming, computer hardware, etc.). As Mäyrä puts it, videogames are a “significant cultural force” – but far from only spawning specific (youth) subcultures, they have managed or are managing to sneak into nearly every aspect of daily life, be it business, communication, education, health care, information design, advertising, entertainment or even scientific discovery (see 3.3.). Nowhere in the Western world is this cultural force more prominently at work (or rather, at play) than in the United States of America, the country that is commonly credited with having started the entire videogame “craze” in the

---


88 Mäyrä 4.
first place (see 3.1.). Given that Americans collectively spend roughly 52 billion hours\textsuperscript{89} a year playing
games, it is high time to investigate the medium that has so captivated the nation.

\textsuperscript{89} Extrapolated from the figures provided by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) in its 2016 report: An estimated 155 million Americans play games for an average of 6.5 hours per week. Even allowing for a generous margin of error – if, for example, only half of these 155 million people truly play for the stated amount of time – the number of hours that Americans collectively spend playing videogames every year still ranges in the hundreds of millions, at the very least.
3. Videogames in US-American Culture

“At the most basic level, game playing has become more or less universal.”

– Henry Jenkins on the status of videogames in America90

As mentioned in the introduction, the medium of videogames has radically changed the entertainment landscape in the US in a very short span of time. Over the past 25-30 years, it has evolved from a curiosity with a limited audience of engineering students and technology aficionados into a billion-dollar global industry whose products can be found on any multimedia device from the dusty, ancient back-office PC still running Windows 95 to the latest sleek, ultra-modern smartphone model. Videogames draw the interest and fascination of more than 155 million Americans on a weekly – and often daily – basis, making the US one of the most enthusiastic gameplaying nations and one of the biggest markets for the sale of videogames, associated hardware, events and game-related paraphernalia.92 However, the relationship between videogames and US-American history and culture runs much deeper than the millions of hours and billions of dollars that Americans spend playing every year, or the waves of public anxiety which their growing popularity continues to trigger. As will be shown in this chapter, the influence of videogames is not limited to the entertainment sphere, although this is where it is most obvious; rather, the enormous popularity of the new medium is causing it to slowly expand into and subtly affect a great many areas of American daily life, ranging from education to science to health care and even politics. Yet the reverse is also true; American history and culture have left and continue to leave their marks upon the development of the new medium, to the point where one would not be amiss to refer to the US as one of the primary cradles of videogame innovation and a driving force in its popularization. Ever since the first


91 The history of videogames, as will be shown in this chapter, is not an unbroken 50-year chain of developments and success stories. In fact, following the invention of what is generally considered to be the first videogame in 1961-62, the medium largely remained out of the public eye until the mid-1970s, at which point it became of commercial interest thanks to the growing availability of cheaper computer hardware. This era – frequently referred to as the “golden age” or the “arcade era” (due to the general enthusiasm for the new medium and its primary manifestation in the form of arcade machines; see below) – itself came to an abrupt end when the US videogame market experienced a disastrous crash in the early 1980s (see the following points for details). The crash and its lasting effects are generally considered the point of origin of modern videogames and their current popularity.

92 ESA.
videogame, *Spacewar*, came into being in 1962, many ground-breaking inventions, pivotal events and great success stories that shaped the industry originated from US research institutions, engineering labs, toy manufacturers and garages. Since listing all these innovations would fill an entire book (and has, in fact, already filled several\(^{93}\)), the following examples can barely even be described as the tip of the iceberg. Instead, they are frames lifted from a highlights reel, meant to illustrate how deeply entwined videogames are with American culture, and how much further this connection is likely to go.


3.1.1. The Birthplace of Milestone Innovations

One game-changing invention which almost certainly prevented videogames from fading back into obscurity after the success of *Spacewar* is the invention of the videogame home console by the American engineer Ralph H. Baer in 1968. Since the vast majority of Americans did not have access to computers and their electronic amusements outside of open-house days at research institutions, Baer conceived of a device which would be small, affordable, and easy to operate by connecting to the television set, which was already a firm fixture in the average American home. The “Brown Box,” so nicknamed for the wood-grain pattern tape the device was wrapped in to give it an air of sophistication, was envisioned by Baer as a television add-on similar to VCRs and came with a small set of hardwired games that were digital variations of ping pong, golf, soccer, and so on. After several years of looking for support to mass-produce the outlandish device, Baer finally convinced television manufacturer Magnavox to license the Brown Box. It debuted under the name of “Magnavox Odyssey” in early 1972, and despite its rather bare-bones functionality (the Magnavox models were downgraded in order to cut costs), it managed to awe the American entertainment world. As Declan Burrowes describes in his 2014 retrospective:

> The Odyssey was basic even for the time. It was battery-powered and couldn’t output sound. The simple white dots it displayed required a lot of imagination to create believable scenes, even with the colorful screen overlays. The console lacked a built-in scoring system, so points and records in *Table Tennis* and *Football* were noted on themed, printed score sheets. *Roulette* and *Simon Says* used physical cards, paper notes, and dice. In

a sense, many of the Odyssey’s games were board games with a bizarre (but exciting) TV element. Unsurprisingly, the Odyssey garnered immediate attention at trade shows and press events. The idea of a television viewer controlling an object on a screen was practically inconceivable at the time. Dealers and journalists were left scrambling to lift their jaws from the floor, and the electronics media was abuzz with talk of Magnavox’s revolutionary “mystery product.” It was a massive, unprecedented step forward for entertainment.94

Although the Magnavox Odyssey was ultimately outmaneuvered and outperformed by a rapid deluge of competing devices, Baer’s invention was the first important step in moving videogames out of the laboratory and into the public sphere.

Another milestone to come out of America is Pong, the very first commercially successful videogame, in late 1972. Originally created by Allan Alcorn as a mere job training exercise for the newly formed company Atari, the simple game about a white pixel dot bouncing between two movable paddles with a sonorous bloop sound effect was more than a little “inspired” by one of Baer’s Magnavox games.95 However, the Atari founders Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney were not trying to create an expensive home console; instead, they affixed a coin tray to the setup Alcorn had constructed – a television screen connected to the electronic components which housed the game, encased in a tall wooden cabinet – and brought it to a neighborhood bar to test its marketability.96 Despite the fact that Pong was, in every respect, a less exciting version of table tennis, its first public trial among the patrons of said bar was to be prophetic: Within the day, Pong went silent – not because of a defect in its programming or wiring, but because the machine was completely jammed with the quarters fed into its coin-slot by the fascinated audience.97 Nick Montfort rightly credits Pong with making computers and videogames accessible to the


96 Kent 41-44.

public, bringing them “out of esoteric data centers and into bars and movie-theater lobbies” and presenting them as fun gadgets that anyone can operate. *Pong* is also credited with starting what is often referred to as the “arcade era,” the period of the 1970s and early to mid-1980s, which saw a boom of coin-operated videogame cabinets in amusement arcades (where they remain a staple attraction to this day).

The special place of videogames in American culture has not solely been carved out by stories of innovation and success; failures have played their part, as well. One particularly high-profile and long-lasting failure will be repeatedly referenced in this chapter because it has changed the American (and, consequently, the global) videogame landscape so utterly and irrevocably. The failure in question is the North American Videogame Crash of 1983, sometimes also referred to as the “Great Crash” or, less commonly, “Atari Shock” (due to the involvement of the American games and console manufacturer Atari). By the early 1980s, videogames had proven to be a veritable goldmine, and like any profitable mine, they had inspired a type of gold rush: Hundreds of game companies had sprung up seemingly overnight in order to make a name for themselves in this exciting new market, dozens of computer and electronics manufacturers were trying to imitate the successes of Magnavox and Atari, flooding the market with highly priced consoles and games exclusive to each of these devices. To make matters worse, a considerable number of these games were either “clones” (imitations of other games), badly designed, poorly advertised or released in rapid succession, which, given their high price, limited their audience considerably. The over-saturation of the market reached critical mass when Atari, the games and console manufacturer which had grown large on the success of *Pong* in the 1970s, vastly overestimated the popularity of its upcoming games, shipping thousands of copies to stores which ultimately remained

---


99 Kent reports that at its peak in 1981, arcade videogames prompted Americans to spend roughly $5 billion and invest more than 75,000 hours into playing them (xvii).


102 According to Kent, Atari grew from a tiny start-up business to a corporation worth $2 billion in only a decade (xvii).
unsold. The poor overall sales led to a wave of bankruptcy among game developers and hardware manufacturers (including Atari), and convinced American retailers that rather than a goldmine, videogames were a repository of fool’s gold, leading many to remove them from stock almost entirely. Indeed, videogames might have been written off as novelty toys forever (or at least, for quite some time), if not for an intervention from the other side of the Pacific. In the aftermath of the crisis, the Japanese videogame company Nintendo began its westward expansion by establishing an American branch in Redmond, Washington, and starting a massive marketing campaign intended to bring its own console and games to the US. The Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), along with its child-friendly and colorful games (e.g. Super Mario, The Legend of Zelda), became a nationwide phenomenon that was supported by celebrity endorsements, special publications like the Nintendo Power magazine, which solicited the participation of children, as well as a slew of Saturday morning cartoons and live-action children’s television programs starring beloved game characters, e.g. The Legend of Zelda (1989), The Super Mario Bros. Super Show! (1989), King Koopa’s Kool Kartoons (1989), and Super Mario World (1991). Other Japanese companies like Sega and Capcom followed suit, marketing their own mascot characters in cartoons like Adventures of Sonic the Hedgehog (1993) and Megaman (1994). This shrewd marketing even reached Hollywood, which produced a number of feature-length films such as The Wizard (1989), Super Mario Bros. (1993), and two Mortal Kombat films in 1995 and 1997, thereby completing the (re-)introduction of videogames to a mass audience. Today, the US is not only one of the most important markets for videogames in the world; it has also come to fulfill the role of a gateway to the West for Asian developers, to the point where American tastes are considered a standard for aesthetics, translation and censorship.


104 Ernkvist 176.


108 The 1995 Mortal Kombat movie and its 1997 sequel are based on the fighting game of the same name by the American developer Midway Games.
issues, and the success of games in the US tends to determine whether they will be released on the smaller and fiscally conservative European market.

3.1.2. Marketing, Translation, Censorship: Some Consequences of the Great Crash

The aftereffects of the Great Crash of 1983 are still plainly visible even today. Videogames are currently the only major medium which is widely imported to the US and which enjoys considerable promotion and popularity regardless of its country of origin. In comparison, a minuscule 0.7 percent of foreign literature is translated and published in the US, and foreign feature films usually only manage to make their way to America in the form of a Hollywood remake (at times even when the film in question was originally in English or was made in another English-speaking country). In contrast, the videogame market has remained open since the Great Crash. Games are imported and translated in large numbers, sometimes either so ineptly (see below) or so artfully that the translations themselves are considered a part of the appeal of a certain title. One example of the latter is the work of translators Alexander O. Smith and Joseph Reeder on several fantasy games by Japanese designer Yasumi Matsuno (*Vagrant Story, Tactics Ogre, Final Fantasy XII*). Due to their use of archaic literary English, these games have achieved a cult status among American and international audiences. Smith and Reeder’s joint translations lend the games an air of particular sophistication and evoke a touch of Shakespearean drama well-suited to the themes of courtly intrigue, political conflict, loyalty and betrayal present in the games’ stories. In fact, their style has become so recognizable that both translators have become irreversibly associated with Matsuno’s work, to

---

109 In the interest of full disclosure, it should be noted that nowadays, it is next to impossible to categorize videogames in the style of “national literatures” (which have themselves become a shaky concept due to globalization). Many game development studios are a part of major international developer-publisher conglomerates with their headquarters scattered across the world. For example, the American publishing giant Electronic Arts currently owns studios and subsidiaries in at least thirteen different countries, including Russia, India, Singapore, South Korea, France, Sweden and Brazil. Cf. “EA Locations,” *Electronic Arts*, 30 Aug. 2015 <http://www.ea.com/locations>. Similarly, publishers from other countries (e.g. Ubisoft, based in France, or Square Enix, based in Japan) own several American studios and subsidiaries. This makes it extremely difficult to truly speak of “[insert-nationality-here] videogames.”

the point where they are specifically invited to adapt his game projects for release in the West.\textsuperscript{111}

The Great Crash has not only affected translations, however. Entire game franchises regularly “migrate” back and forth across the Pacific Ocean. For example, American developers occasionally license or buy out a popular Japanese-produced franchise (such as \textit{Silent Hill} or \textit{Devil May Cry}) to either continue the series or re-imagine it with distinctly Western aesthetics. Moreover, game developers and other entertainment conglomerates may collaborate on “crossover” games, i.e. games which transport characters from different titles into one and the same virtual world to have them compete against each other or join forces on an adventure. These creations in particular highlight how international videogames have truly become, since they rely on the assumption that the intended audience will be familiar with all, or at least most, of the original titles, regardless of their country of origin or even their genre. Examples include \textit{PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale}, which unites characters from different titles developed for the Sony PlayStation; \textit{Marvel vs. Capcom}, a fighting game created through a partnership between the Japanese developer Capcom and the American comic book titan Marvel; or \textit{Kingdom Hearts}, which features a universe inhabited by beloved Disney and Square Enix characters.

Another long-lasting effect of the Great Crash is that (as briefly mentioned in 3.1.1.) the sheer size of the revitalized American games market has turned it into a kind of “gatekeeper” for international releases. Appealing to US-American sensibilities has become a concern for many foreign developers, particularly those based in Japan,\textsuperscript{112} and the success of a game in the US may determine whether it is released in other Western countries. Taken to the extreme, the desire to appeal to American audiences can lead games to develop a kind of “split personality” due to the creation of two versions of the same title, one intended for release in Japan, the other for release in North America (and, subsequently, other Western countries). Such is the case with Cavia’s \textit{Nier} (2010), an action-RPG that exists as two separate titles, both featuring the same basic storyline, gameplay and content, but with radically different premises. \textit{Nier Replicant}, designed to appeal to the Japanese market, features an attractive young man searching for a cure for his sister’s illness (which falls in line with the trend towards younger protagonists in Japanese popular culture), whereas \textit{Nier Gestalt}, the game conceived for release in North America, stars a grizzled,


muscle-bound older warrior on a quest to save his small daughter (intended to appeal to American family values and ideals of masculinity). Although the precise reasons for these changes are not reliably documented, the fact nevertheless remains that two versions were produced to appeal to audiences in two distinct cultural spheres. Less extreme versions of similar marketing concerns sometimes result in what is colloquially known in gaming circles as “angry box art.” It refers to the practice of redesigning the packaging and promotional materials of a game for its release in America. This practice tends to involve the alteration or replacement of friendly- or neutral-looking artwork to make it appear more aggressive and action-oriented, for instance by making happy characters look stern or furious, or by replacing artistically stylized, ambiguous logos with combat scenes, thus earning the nickname. At worst, this practice can even result in a complete misinterpretation of the theme and content of a game. One of the most glaring examples is _Ico_, a game that is frequently cited as a work of art when the debate turns to the question of whether videogames may ever be considered an art form. Since the game revolves around the loneliness and strangeness of exploring an abandoned castle maze, with play mechanics which center on cooperation and puzzle-solving, the original box art pays homage to the surrealist painter Giorgio de Chirico and his work “The Nostalgia of the Infinite.” Upon its American release, however, the image was changed to a shot of the very angry-looking main character swinging a sword, despite the fact that combat and conflict play a negligible part in the game. Here, the desire to hit a particular cultural vein (or perhaps, it would be better to say a cultural stereotype) resulted in an alienating experience for the audience.

A far more delicate issue than the rearrangement of promotional material is the practice of censorship. All too often, foreign (especially Asian) videogames are censored in order to appeal to the cultural sensibilities and moral values of American audiences. This can range from relatively mild

---


censorship like the deletion of expletives from dialogue to the complete removal of any and all references to non-American cultures. Some companies like Nintendo of America have achieved a certain level of notoriety for their strict policies regarding the depiction of religious symbols, the consumption of alcohol, nudity, or the use of coarse language in dialogue. Especially during the 1980s and 1990s, in-game references to religion were so heavily edited that in some cases, even the crosses on virtual tombstones and first aid kits were removed, not to mention occult symbols like the pentagram. Numerous games underwent the editing process, sometimes to alienating or comical effect. For example, the censorship of Final Fantasy IV removed, among other things, all references to hell and death in dialogue, leading to phrases such as, “Fall flat into the deep ravine!” (instead of “Go to hell!”) or “A girl from Baron was kept from falling down” (instead of “A girl from Baron was kept from dying”). Other games saw more substantial graphical alterations: EarthBound/Mother 2 had the red cross removed from hospital signs and Castlevania, a game inspired by vampire mythology, substituted the main character’s arsenal of crucifixes and holy artifacts with boomerangs. Although such excessive censorship of religious content is no longer common, it may still occur. For instance, several games in recent years have been recalled in the US for including phrases from the Qu’ran and other Islamic symbols, such as The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time (1998), Kakuto Chojin (2003), and LittleBigPlanet (2008), which was recalled world-wide. In some cases, the translations have become fan favorites despite their altered content, particularly Final Fantasy VI, whose villain’s disguised expletives, “Son of a submariner!” and “HATE HATE HATE!” (a substitute for “damn”) have achieved a high recognition value since they emphasize the character’s comically erratic behavior. The removal of alcoholic beverages or references to drinking is sometimes still practiced to make games eligible for release to a younger audience. This has led to many puzzling moments in games where items advertised as “herbal tea” are off-limits for the teenage protagonist, harmless “cafés” feature liquor bottles lining the shelves behind the bar, and characters may engage in “soup drinking” contests.


While most of these alterations are relatively minor and can either be dismissed as oddities or fondly remembered with a chuckle, others are far more problematic since they essentially take the form of cultural and/or minority erasure. One particularly unfortunate form of censorship that is still practiced in the US is the alteration of a character's gender or sexual orientation in order to conform to heteronormative standards. This may happen to feminine-looking male or masculine-looking female characters, cross-dressers, as well as characters who show signs of attraction to the same sex: Hints at homosexual love may be removed, or genders may be changed to reflect a character's physical appearance. At best, the gender of a “controversial” character may be presented as ambiguous. Examples include *Wild Arms 2*’s Caina, a young man implied to be in love with his male superior, who was rewritten as female for the American release, *Shenmue II*’s Yuan, a male cross-dresser, likewise presented as female in the overseas edition, or the censoring of the implied lesbian relationship in *Harvest Moon DS Cute*, whose Japanese version allowed the female main character to engage in a marriage-like ceremony with her female best friend and live together raising a child. The censorship of cultural content in order to make games more palatable (or more acceptable) to American audiences is likewise problematic. It can range from minor cosmetic corrections of artwork to an interference with the story and characters on a fundamental level. Among the most frequently censored elements are foreign-sounding names or locations, foreign-language song lyrics, culturally specific food and drink items, religious holidays, festivals, and historical references. Some of the most notorious examples are the *Ace Attorney* series (centered on lawyers solving court cases), which saw the character names anglicized and the setting moved from an unnamed Japanese town to Los Angeles. The original localization of *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona* (entitled *Revelations: Persona* in the US), likewise set in Japan, went so far as to redraw the characters’ faces and change their skin tones to non-Japanese ethnicities. In rare cases, the changes may take on truly byzantine proportions as game scripts, characterization and story events are altered so substantially as to result in an almost completely different game. For instance, the publisher of *Sengoku Basara* (released as *Devil Kings* in North America and Europe), which is a fictionalization of the lives of historical figures in feudal Japan, decided to replace the gameplay mode detailing the characters’ historically inspired exploits with a generic fantasy story for the Western

---

release. Likewise, the American localization of *Final Fantasy X* made extensive changes to its script and several smaller changes to its characterization, purportedly to make lip-synching the dialogue easier for the American dub. This resulted in a peculiar gaming experience for German-language players, as the German localization team decided to provide subtitles based on the original Japanese script alongside the American audio track, which revealed that a number of American pop culture references, attempts at slapstick humor, and the closing passionate love confession between the main characters never occurred in the original game.

What these examples show is that the US is and always has been critically important to the development of videogames. American engineers, programmers, toymakers and shrewd businesspeople played a substantial role in moving the medium out of the research lab and into the homes and hearts of a global mass audience. Games have transformed from mere technological curiosities into dazzling, multimillion dollar spectacles which, until fairly recently, would have seemed like the wild imaginings of a science fiction author. They are the products of digital frontier spirit, business ingenuity, and endless playful curiosity. Once deeply mysterious creations that could only be understood by programmers, they are now accessible to billions of offices and households the world over in the form of Windows installation bundles, iPhone apps, and the vast reaches of the Internet. America might not be the cradle of videogames, but it is the point of origin for many of the most pivotal developments that have shaped the medium into what it is today, and is also home to some of the most avid videogame players in the world – 155 million, to be exact. Yet, their immense appeal invites questions and concern, as will be explored in the following points. Even in 2015, it seems that America is of two minds on the new medium that emerged from a small computer lab at MIT more than 50 years ago – unsure whether to embrace and indulge in it, or to keep hoping that it will just go away.

---

124 One addition presumably introduced to create a lighter atmosphere is the inclusion of references to American pop songs, despite the game being set in a fantastical world unconnected to 20th-century Earth. This translation gag is continued in the sequel *Final Fantasy X-2*, expanding it to the realm of advertisements, movies, and TV series such as *Aliens*, *Sesame Street*, *Seinfeld*, *The Simpsons*, and, oddly enough – considering that the game is rated T for ages 13 and up – the adult film series *Girls Gone Wild*. Cf. *Final Fantasy X*, dev. Square (PlayStation 2: Sony Computer Entertainment, 2001); cf. *Final Fantasy X-2*, dev. Square Enix (PlayStation 2: Square Enix, 2003).
125 Entertainment Software Association.
3.2. American Attitudes towards Games: The Influence of Public Discourse

As mentioned in the previous sections, videogames have undergone a rapid development from a niche medium, of interest only to a handful of computer scientists, to a global, multi-billion dollar industry whose biggest titles manage to outperform bestselling novels, hit albums and even, on occasion, Hollywood blockbusters.\textsuperscript{126} In addition, they exert considerable influence on various areas of American daily life such as education, the creative arts, or social and political activism (see 3.3.). Unfortunately, as indicated above, public discourse about videogames does not reflect the breadth of their use or their role in the American entertainment landscape. Videogames seem to exist in a curious kind of media bubble: On the one hand, information about their inner workings, themes, meaning, goals and other aspects can be found mainly in special-interest publications. Since these game-oriented news outlets, review columns and blogs implicitly promote the very subject they cover (as special-interest publications are wont to do), and many of them maintain close ties with the very industry they cover, transparency and objectivity can be an issue.\textsuperscript{127} On the other hand, in the mainstream news media, videogames do not enjoy a particularly favorable reputation. They have been portrayed as the root cause – or at least as a trigger – of a broad range of social problems, ranging from childhood obesity, decreased academic proficiency, sexual “deviancy,” behavioral issues and mental illness to drug abuse, violent crime and mass shootings, often in a sensationalist manner. Since the majority of Americans who are largely or entirely unfamiliar with videogames tend to receive game-related information from mainstream news publications, talk shows, etc., this creates a sharp divide in attitude between gamers and non-gamers, not to mention an information deficit.

This “game news bubble” also affects scholarly circles, as researchers either devote much time and effort to painstakingly correcting factual errors and arguing against misrepresentations in order to


ensure that laypeople can make informed decisions on these topics, or seek to prove/disprove public concerns about videogames through studies into their connection to health and social issues. The situation is complicated further by the fact that many studies are either difficult to replicate, are almost immediately contradicted by other studies of the same type, are often either based on very small sample sizes or only examine the short term, or are affected by flawed methodology (e.g. the selection of test subjects according to preconceived notions about player demographics). The veritable flood of data runs the risk of creating an endless loop of questions that detract from a far more crucial issue: Since so many people, experts and laypersons alike, are asking “what” – “What do games do to the people who play them?” – the question of “why” – “Why do we think and talk about games the way we do?” – is often absent from the discussion.

None of this is to say that an exploration of the potential negative effects of videogames on their players or society at large is useless or unnecessary. In fact, it is vital to cover any and all aspects of the new medium – positive and negative – in order to develop a nuanced understanding. However, the myopic focus on only these issues has created two hardened fronts: The enthusiasts often become defensive and even close their ears to legitimate critical discussion, while the uninitiated become or remain wary, worried or outright misinformed, and try to seek solace in blanket legislative measures (e.g. sales prohibitions of certain types of games) and censorship. The continued and nigh-on omnipresent overemphasis placed on the potential negative aspects of games eclipses the discussion of other aspects, which are easily deserving of the same amount of attention, if not more.

The interesting thing about the decidedly negative reporting is that the concerns being raised are nowhere near as varied and numerous as they seem on the surface. They can usually be boiled down to two central problem areas, the first being concerns about the breakdown of society (e.g. violence, crime, suicide, addiction, and so forth) and the second being concerns about the impact of videogames on the players' own development (e.g. academic performance, self-esteem, social skills, and so forth).

---


social retardation), the second being the sacredness and the moral “weight” of childhood (i.e. the concept of childhood as a time of innocence, to be preserved and guarded against vice and evil for as long as possible). To complicate matters, the two issues are often implicitly or explicitly linked to the point where they become a mental portmanteau, a strange kind of equation – videogames equal violence equals child endangerment – whose origins are rarely explored or explained. This creates anxiety about all videogames, no matter whether or not they are intended for a young audience.130 Speaking on the connection between childhood and mass media in general, Chas Critcher notes: “Both were institutionalized in the twentieth century, though with much earlier roots. Both allegedly pose dangers which must be headed off by new regulatory bodies. Both help define a modernized society. When the two coincide, there is often unease.”131 When the idea of games as vehicles of violent content collides head-on with the idea of games as a children’s medium, heated debates ensue that fuel misrepresentations of the gaming audience in general, and the audience of certain controversial games in particular. To illustrate, consider the discussion hosted on Fox News upon the 2009 release of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, an extremely popular first-person shooter set in World War II, whose emphasis on armed conflict and realistic-looking graphics generated considerable controversy. In the Fox segment, both the host Steve Doocy and guest speaker Jim Steyer of the advocacy organization Common Sense Media refer to the game as a danger for “kids” and “eight-year-olds”132 despite the fact that the game is rated “M” (mature, i.e. ages 17 and up) and is thus neither intended for nor for sale to anyone under the specified age limit. The conflation of a game’s recommended player age with a hypothetical eight-year-old who might sneak a peek without adult supervision creates a distorted view with threatening connotations. The question “What if an eight-year-old found this game in their parents’ closet?” becomes the focal point of the discussion, ignoring the real target audience (adults and near-adults) and preventing any deeper analysis of the reasons why the game is so popular with said audience. Furthermore, it bears a dangerous and not unintentional resemblance to the issues raised in gun control debates concerning weapon safety, access restrictions, and, of course, the very

130 In the US and Canada, videogames are subject to age and content ratings issued by the ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board), which fulfills many of the same functions as the MPAA does for films. A game intended for mature audiences is clearly labeled as such, and possible objectionable content (e.g. use of expletives, depictions of violence, alcohol and drug use, or nudity) is likewise indicated on the packaging.


real numbers of children who are injured or killed due to playing with a loaded gun. By replacing the well-known image of a child finding a gun in the closet with that of a child finding a videogame in the closet, an overlap between these two scenarios is created: The videogame is now at least as, if not more, dangerous than a weapon designed for the express purpose of taking lives. Fox News, a channel known for its sensationalism, is far from the only outlet prone to providing distorted facts or one-sided coverage of game-related news. One of many more recent examples is a 2016 CNN article on a mass shooting incident in Germany, which is not only quick to seek an explanation for this act of violence in the existence of military shooter and fighting games like Gears of War or Mortal Kombat, but, in the same breath, mentions that the immensely popular title Pokémon Go (2016), which focuses on the catching of, rearing of and competition between adorable cartoon monsters,\(^\text{135}\) is also violent: “The titles seem to say it all: ‘Manhunt,’ ‘Thrill Kill,’ ‘Gears of War’ and ‘Mortal Kombat.’ However, even the seemingly benign ‘Pokemon Go’ requires players to go to battle.”\(^\text{134}\) The fact aside that these threateningly named games all differ in style, theme, presentation and the contextualization of the violence inherent in their gameplay, the mentioning of Pokémon Go (ESRB age rating “10+” for “fantasy violence” in the US, PEGI age rating “3+” in Europe) in conjunction with these games creates a false equivalence: All violence, no matter how cartoonish, stylized or mild, is equal and, implicitly, equally harmful. This invites an unfamiliar reader — especially someone who is already anxious about the subject — to make various assumptions which are likely to fuel their anxiety, since Pokémon, a multimedia franchise specifically conceived to entertain a young audience, has now been linked to M-rated warfare simulations, which are in turn implied to be the root cause of a mass shooting.

These two examples are representative of the dominant discourse on the subject of videogames, which all too frequently foregoes factual analysis in favor of appeals to emotion, speculation, a lack of context and the accidental or even deliberate distortion of facts. Rather than raise awareness or stimulate discussion, this type of rhetoric only contributes to the spread of misinformation and anxiety, which in turn hampers or outright prevents a deeper, more nuanced understanding of games.

\(^\text{133}\) Pokémon Go is a game based on the animated children’s television series Pokémon, which focuses on the same themes: The young main characters seek out, befriend and raise the titular “pocket monsters” in order to compete in tournaments for the honor of being named the best trainer.

3.2.1. Pattern Recognition: Videogames and Media Panics

The curious thing about the American media discourse on the subject of games is that on a larger scale, there is little correlation between actual occurrences which might be linked to games (e.g. game-related crimes or games with particularly violent content) and the tide of reporting on the topic of violence in videogames. Indeed, an examination of news reports over a longer span of time reveals that certain topics are circulated as regularly as the changing of the seasons, often without any specific event to trigger a sudden increase in media attention. Data journalist David McCandless illustrates this clockwork regularity in a diagram of “media-inflamed fears” using data gleaned from Google Trends and the Google News Timeline. In its most recent (2017) iteration, the regularly updated graph covers the period from 2000 to 2016:

Fig. 2: “Mountains out of Molehills: A Timeline of Media-Inflamed Fears,” in: David McCandless, Information Is Beautiful, 2017, 31 Aug. 2017 <http://informationisbeautiful.net>. (See Appendix B for full-scale version.)

The color-coded types of media fears identified by McCandless range from health concerns over the outbreak of infectious diseases like SARS (orange), bird flu (yellow), swine flu (pink) and Ebola (dark gray), to less intense, but more regular technology-related fears like cell phone radiation (dark green), particular computer viruses and malfunctions (pale gray) and speculation about vaccinations (forest green), to more outlandish but fairly regular concerns like asteroid collisions (pale green) and killer insects (dark
blue). One segment in particular stands out in this parade of media panics, fittingly rendered in a deep red color: reports on violent videogames. Invariably, this red tide rises every year, peaking in November and April like seasonal storms. In his TED talk “The Beauty of Data Visualization,” McCandless explains the reasons for these bi-annual peaks: The November increase in reporting on violent videogames can be attributed to the start of the Christmas shopping season; since videogames are popular holiday gifts, it makes sense (from a journalistic standpoint) to reopen a discussion on the most well-known game-related concerns.\textsuperscript{135} The peak in April, however, is more difficult to explain and requires a very good memory, since the incident responsible for it occurred more than eighteen years ago – practically an eon in the fast-paced world of news reporting.\textsuperscript{136} Said incident is the mass shooting at Columbine High School, Colorado, in April 1999, perpetrated by two students, whose senseless brutality shocked the entire nation and caused it to become one of the most reported mass shootings. Desperate for an explanation for the terrible deed – preferably an easy, comprehensible one with easy, comprehensible solutions – many American news outlets saw the root cause in the shooters’ tastes in music, film, fashion, and especially videogames, since both boys had used the level editors in the first-person shooter games \textit{Doom} and \textit{Quake} to simulate the deed before carrying it out.\textsuperscript{137} According to McCandless, the shocking nature of the incident lives on in the form of the April “aftershocks” depicted in the graph, even though the reports themselves do not necessarily reference the Columbine High School Massacre in any way.\textsuperscript{138} Indeed, these waves have taken on a life of their own, artificially sustaining themselves and their particular thematic focus.

Another point worthy of note is that videogames are hardly the first medium to come under such intense scrutiny. Of course, since news reporting is current rather than retrospective, this can create the impression that games are “singled out,” and the fact that they are singled out can be taken to mean that there must be a good reason for it. From a historical perspective, however, videogames are merely the most recent medium in a long line of media which came under fire from politicians, educators, religious leaders and/or moralists during their initial rise to popularity, but which have since been accepted as


\textsuperscript{136} McCandless, “The Beauty of Data Visualization.”

\textsuperscript{137} Cf. Thomas A. Birkland and Regina G. Lawrence, “Media Framing and Policy Change after Columbine,” \textit{American Behavioral Scientist} 52.10 (June 2009): 1409. A level editor allows players to create their own playable levels, complete with custom goals, obstacles and challenges. The feature is typically intended to augment the play experience and foster a sense of community among the players by allowing them to share their custom levels with one another.

\textsuperscript{138} McCandless, “The Beauty of Data Visualization.”
“normal” parts of American daily life. If they still cause controversy and public discussion at all, it is usually in response to specific occurrences. For instance, the young adult novel series *The Twilight Saga* (2008-2012) has been widely criticized for its portrayal of abusive relationships to a vulnerable target audience (teenagers), but no one today would have taken its publication as a cue to argue that young people should be kept from reading at all costs lest their minds suffer irreparable damage.

A journey back through the past 300 years reveals that objections to new media follow a pattern of their own: Upon its initial rise to popularity, concerns are voiced that 1) the new medium may “corrupt” vulnerable members of society, 2) the consumption of and engagement with the medium will foster antisocial or criminal behavior, and 3) the medium possesses dangerous and/or addictive properties and therefore must be strictly regulated or outright prohibited. Through the ages, television, comic books, movies and even novels have been widely contested for many of the same reasons as videogames. In the 1980s and early 1990s, when videogames were still considered a niche interest that required special knowledge and expensive hardware, the vast majority of social criticism and parental/educational concern was directed at television. Although television technology was invented more than thirty years prior, by the 1980s, it had become a mainstay in American households that offered around-the-clock entertainment for all age groups. The accessibility and convenience of television came under intense scrutiny for its potential influence on young audiences, who, unlike their parents, were growing up surrounded by televised images (e.g. television as a “babysitter”). The encroachment of television on childhood is the basis of Neil Postman’s 1982 work *The Disappearance of Childhood*, wherein he famously argues that the introduction of television leads to the destruction of childhood (which he characterizes as a time of innocence):

> We may conclude, then, that television erodes the dividing line between childhood and adulthood in three ways, all having to do with its undifferentiated accessibility: first, because it requires no instruction to grasp its form; second, because it does not make complex demands on either mind or behavior; and third, because it does not segregate its audience.139

The principal problem of television, so Postman, is not that it enables access to “unrelenting violence” and “moral degeneracy,” but that it depicts the world “as it is” (especially in newscasts), which could undermine a child’s belief in adult rationality, in the possibility of an ordered world, in a hopeful

---

The pessimistic, not to say apocalyptic tone of Postman’s arguments perfectly reflects the above-mentioned general objections to a new medium as a corruptive force with dangerous properties (e.g. it stifles independent thought) that might encourage reprehensible behavior or cause trauma (e.g. although Postman formally objects to the idea of homosexuality as a sin, he nevertheless claims that its depiction on television will have unforeseen ramifications for the innocence of children). Critcher offers a retrospective of media controversies by pointing out the range of heated discussions regarding the violent and sexually explicit content of television (and its availability to children) in Britain, Australia, New Zealand and the USA during the 1980s and 1990s.

Traveling further back in time reveals similar concerns about comic books in the 1950s and early 1960s. Though available in bound form since the 1930s, comic books became the center of attention in the wake of World War II, when the strong atmosphere of conservatism and morality in the US came into direct conflict with the trend towards crime and horror comics among young people, thus leading to the concern that comics were tempting America’s youth to a life of crime. The medium and its popular subject matter also provided a far more convenient “explanation” for social problems like gang violence or civil unrest than complex root causes such as poverty, disenfranchisement and racism. Far earlier, during the 1910s and 1920s, the popularity of movies inspired concerns that they might affect the minds of viewers (especially young viewers) and inspire criminal acts and general moral depravity. These concerns finally led to the introduction of the Motion Picture Production Code in 1930, which strictly regulated the ways certain subjects were to be presented so as to discourage imitation. This trend of treating new media with suspicion and worry can be traced all the way to the 18th and 19th centuries, when moralists, educators and politicians repeatedly voiced concerns over the increasing literacy rates, particularly in connection with the emerging popularity of the novel, whose reputation was largely one of low-brow entertainment. When viewed from a 21st-century perspective, these reservations take on an almost surreal quality, given that they are directed towards a skill that is now viewed as one of the most

140 Postman 94-95.
141 Postman 92.
142 Critcher 97.
144 Critcher 93. Critcher notes that the introduction of radio did not garner the same amount of criticism and protest as most other media, on account of it lacking a visual component (94).
important and desirable abilities to develop, as well as one of the most highly regarded leisure activities. Yet, in the 18th and 19th centuries, when the growing access to education and the steadily rising demands of the reading public called for cheap, mass-produced books, reading became an act worthy of deep suspicion. For instance, William Warner points out that novels “were thought especially dangerous for young women, their minds unshielded by a classical education, who would grow addicted to the pleasures induced by novels, turn against serious reading, have their passions awakened, and form false expectations about life.” Critcher likewise notes that dime novels and pulp magazines were widely criticized in the US and abroad for supposedly providing incentive for sexual perversion and criminal behavior. In short, an examination of the controversies of decades and centuries past invariably highlights the same points of criticism, irrespective of the medium being scrutinized.

Both the degree of artificiality in news reporting on the subject and the fact that most other mediums have gone through comparable periods of intense public scrutiny indicate that videogames still have a long way to go before they are accepted as anything more than a questionable pastime. Even though more than a third of all Americans play videogames, and have been doing so for years, even decades, public attitude towards them remains frustratingly ambivalent. Games might be popular, but discussion about them remains vague and one-sided outside of scholarly and enthusiast circles. This is not only because games are still strange and new, but because the perception of their audience remains skewed. As mentioned above, violence is only one half of the associative portmanteau. The other half refers to children – child endangerment, childhood socialization problems, children’s mental and physical health. By and large, games are still seen as a medium for children and adolescents, even though it is quite doubtful that those 155 million players, with the spending power of roughly $12 billion per year, are comprised solely (or even primarily) of Americans whose finances amount to ten dollars of pocket money. In fact, industry data collected during the course of the past 15 years consistently places the average American gamer at over 30 years of age (35 as of 2015). Where, then, does the persistent association of videogames and children come from? Is it the tendency towards “cute” and colorful visual designs,

---

145 Interestingly, Postman regularly contrasts television with books/reading, which he views as the superior and far more desirable activity due to its intellectually stimulating qualities and medium-inherent access restrictions.
147 Critcher 92.
148 Entertainment Software Association.
149 Entertainment Software Association.
especially in older games? Is it the problematic assumption that “play” and “games” in general are things only children engage in? Is it the fact that they go beep?

3.2.2. Videogames and their (Presumed) Audience

There are many superficial reasons for the assumption that videogames are a children’s medium. One might point to cartoon-style character designs, colorful palettes, the frequent presence of fantasy or fairytale elements, their noisy nature, or the simple fact that play is usually associated with childhood and frivolity as contributing factors, to name only a few. However, they do not account for the fact that the supposed videogame audience is not only young, but also male. In popular culture, this association is cemented in the stereotype of the “nerd,” an awkward, unpopular male teenager with poor social skills who obsessively plays games and pursues other niche hobbies in his parents’ basement. Often, the nerd character is also portrayed as physically unattractive, with equally unattractive habits (e.g. poor hygiene), which implies that basic attention to his own needs is subordinate to leveling his dark elf in World of Warcraft. The stereotype is a distorted, super-condensed reflection of the idea of gaming as a hobby for (male) youngsters: If the nerd character is not literally a child or teenager, then he is frequently depicted as immature and unable to master the demands of adult life on his own, just like a child. The core assumption behind it, though, is not simply the result of Hollywood stereotyping – indeed, it appears as though there is scientific evidence to support the idea that videogames are the hobby of a young, male demographic and barely anyone else. The overwhelming majority of studies conducted on videogame play behavior and habits draws from a pool of young, male participants ranging from preadolescents to, more recently, college students (aged 18 to 25). This trend has its origin in the videogame advertising strategies and player demographics research conducted during the early 1980s, when videogames first garnered a mass market appeal. For example, a 1985 study by Robert McClure on the correlation between age and gaming found that younger participants were more comfortable with the new medium and were more

150 The simple graphics of the pre-3D era meant that most videogame characters were little more than a collection of pixels, their designs and physical characteristics exaggerated in order to allow players to distinguish them (e.g. Pac-Man is nothing more than a gluttonous yellow ball with a mouth, Mario is most recognizable due to his big nose, prominent mustache and plumber’s overall, and so forth).

likely to enjoy engaging with it, whereas older participants were more likely to shy away from interacting with it.\textsuperscript{152} Another study conducted by McClure and Gary Mears a year earlier had sought to correlate personality traits and demographic variables of gamers, and had found the average gamer to be young, male, and interested in “competition, whereas older participants and girls were found to be disinterested in videogames and uncomfortable with computers.\textsuperscript{153} Many subsequent studies were conducted on the same premise – namely that children and teenagers, particularly young boys, are most receptive to videogames since they are quick to adapt to the “wiring of the world” and much more open to mastering new technologies compared to their parents’ generation. Given this bias, the vast majority of studies conducted since the 1980s either confirmed these results or took them as a cue to select their own participants based on their gender.

However, 1980s videogame research was conducted in an exceptional context. In the wake of the Great Videogame Crash of 1983, which had just brought the nascent American game industry to its knees (see 3.1.), children became the primary target of videogame companies (e.g. Nintendo) seeking to reinvigorate the market, since they were identified as the group most receptive to the new form of entertainment. Games were deliberately advertised as a youth medium, with a slew of magazines, toys and children’s television series to support the hype.\textsuperscript{154} When researchers set out to document this “new face” of gaming, they inadvertently encountered two obstacles. The first is the near-automatic gendering of hobbies and other pursuits, i.e. the classification of certain activities as either “masculine” or “feminine.” This gendering is most obvious in a children’s toy aisle, past or present, where dolls, fashion accessories and domestic toys are designed and packaged with stereotypical symbols of femininity in mind (e.g. soft colors, pink wrapping, glittery font, “cute” shapes), whereas sports accessories, science kits and construction toys are designed to conform to perceptions of masculinity (e.g. strong colors, functional shapes, action-oriented design). Videogames are gendered on multiple levels: For one, they are a technological product played using complex electronic equipment, which places them in a domain that has been and still is firmly thought of as “male.” For another, the games themselves are designed around activities that, according to classic gender roles, can be seen as “masculine,” e.g. combat, competitive


\textsuperscript{154} Kinder 89-90.
sports, racing, exploration of the wild outdoors, etc. Moreover, the stories told by games tend to revolve around a male protagonist and/or include elements from male-centric narratives (e.g. saving the kidnapped damsel, winning “the girl” through heroics). All these aspects invite the assumption that the intended audience must also be male. What further cements the gendering of videogames is the fact that until the 1990s, the primary places to play games were outdoors, in the arcades found in shopping centers, at gas stations, amusement parks, or near pubs and bars. Henry Jenkins observes that traditional play spaces vary strongly for American boys and girls: Whereas girls were (and often still are) expected to play at home and focus on domestically-oriented toys, boys were (and still are) encouraged to explore the outside world and were more frequently given the means to do so (e.g. bicycles, sports equipment, youth clubs). Hence, it is no surprise that, until relatively recently, preteen to teenage boys formed the most “visible” part of the videogame audience, since they had the necessary tools and permission to roam the neighborhood without parental supervision. Researchers like Rebecca Tews and Valerie Walkerdine call attention to another important side effect of gendering videogames: If they are classified as a “masculine” activity, women and girls who take an interest in them are much more likely to experience guilt or shame for their “unfeminine” preferences and thus either deny their enjoyment of games or claim no interest altogether. In her observations of girls’ interactions with videogames, Walkerdine notes that boys are socially conditioned to try and win, but that girls who exhibit the same drive to be victorious “risk losing their designation as feminine by coming too far onto the side of masculinity” and are thus forced to deny their competitive urges in order to conform to the expectations placed upon their gender. What results from this simultaneous desire and denial is that girls frequently derogate their own skills and knowledge, fall into supporting roles and try to avoid competitive play altogether, particularly against boys. Walkerdine also notes that girls become subconsciously inventive in their attempts to reconcile their femininity with the masculine hobby, for example by carefully selecting avatars which incorporate traditionally feminine aspects: “[T]he choice of cute and cuddly avatars and femmes fatale[s] are two ways of finding a position which attempts to resolve the contradiction between femininity and masculinity.


157 Walkerdine 48, 51, 55,
which the girls must hold in some way.” Similarily, Tews refutes the conclusions of early demographic studies by pointing out that girls were/are more likely to avoid the competitive, male-dominated arcades, and, as per their social conditioning, are more likely to value cooperative aspects of play. “Additionally,” Tews remarks, “anecdotal research suggests that females believe video gameplay [sic] is a male-dominated activity and are reticent to admit the frequency of their game use.” When these factors are taken into consideration, it becomes clear that male-oriented videogame studies are, in fact, studies in invisibility, as women and girls seek to hide or mitigate their interest in games in order to “save face” and often avoid besting male players in order to maintain their passive, cooperation-oriented social role.

Roughly 30 years later, the assumptions which have become cemented as a result of the special circumstances of the 1980s are nothing if not hopelessly outdated. According to data by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), which is dedicated to supplying demographic data to game developers and other branches of the videogame industry, the average American gamer is roughly 35 years of age, a figure which has fluctuated very little during the past ten years. The overwhelming majority of gamers – 74 percent, to be precise – are not children or teenagers, but adults over the age of 18. Furthermore, the report notes that the average gamer looks back on roughly twelve years of videogame experience, which lends credence to Tews's assertion that “[…] there is no evidence to suggest that it [the hobby] is outgrown or that people do not continue to play into adulthood. In fact, it appears that adults who played as adolescents continue to be avid users.” In fact, the ESA figure suggests that a significant portion of the current adult gamers may be the very children who were originally introduced to the medium in the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, girls and women are by no means an insignificant minority: Around 44 percent of gamers are female, and the number of adult women who play is significantly larger (33 percent) than that of teenage boys (15 percent). More importantly, the data collected by the ESA reveals gaming to be a highly social activity, as 56 percent of gamers play with others – be they online contacts, parents or other family members, friends or spouses. These statistics show what the American news media (and studies on gaming behaviors, to a certain degree) have yet to take into account, namely

---

158 Walkerdine 53-54.
160 Entertainment Software Association.
161 Tews 171.
162 Entertainment Software Association.
163 Entertainment Software Association.
that videogames have penetrated all age groups and the different strata of American society. The average American gamer is no longer the ten-year-old computer whiz kid in *The Wizard* or the lonely, inept nerd living in his parents’ basement, if indeed he (or she) ever was. Games have found their way into millions of households, bridging the generational gap, uniting friends and family in front of the screen, and bringing entertainment to businesswomen, grocery store clerks, stay-at-home fathers, grade school teachers and retirees alike. If anything can be inferred from the diversity of the audience, it is that videogames are far from a homogeneous medium, and must offer a wide variety of play styles, aesthetics, experiences and narratives in order to appeal to so many millions of Americans who could not differ more in their preferences, interests and desires.

3.3. Things that Go Beep Revisited: Videogames and American Culture

The interesting thing about the influence videogames exert on various aspects of American entertainment, business and culture is that it goes almost entirely unreported in mainstream news media. It should be impossible for a medium which has gained a reputation for being flashy and noisy, and which is the cause of so much excitement (both positive and negative), to be virtually invisible, and yet, games seem to have a knack for slipping under the radar of public attention. Outside of special interest publications aimed at enthusiasts and a handful of technology blogs buried in the opinion sections of big news websites like CNN or *The New York Times*, it is rare to see games make headlines in the context of anything other than the aforementioned topics (violence and child endangerment), or an occasional business report. It seems that even in 2017, James Newman’s words still ring true: When games are not raising a furor due to health and safety concerns, they are “easily and readily denigrated as trivial – something that will be ‘grown out of’,” and are considered “mere trifles – low art – carrying none of the weight, gravitas or credibility of more traditional media.”164 This is truly a shame, since games have accomplished a great number of things that might (or should) be of interest even to non-afficionados: Among other things, they continuously push the boundaries of modern computer technology, have transformed Hollywood movie-making, invented entirely new genres of music, and inspired new styles of art. They are beginning to achieve recognition as a deeply creative and artistic medium, as evidenced by their admittance to the prestigious

---

164 Newman 5.
Grammy Awards\textsuperscript{165} and several high-profile exhibitions in such eminent institutions as the Smithsonian or the Museum of Modern Art. Moreover, they increasingly find use in non-entertainment contexts, and are slowly but surely altering the ways in which Americans do business, conduct scientific research projects, organize protests, spread awareness of social issues, stay healthy or acquire particular skills, as will be explored in the following points.

3.3.1. Games, Art and Entertainment

a. Cinema

The relationship between games and cinema is one of the most fruitful media partnerships of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, characterized by parallel technological advancements (e.g. computer-assisted editing, CG special effects) and creative “cross-pollination” in terms of visual aesthetics, sound design and storytelling. The possibilities and, in fact, the mere existence of the videogame as a medium have been a source of inspiration to Hollywood movie-making for decades. One early example comes from writer and director Steven Lisberger, who credits his fascination with \textit{Pong} (1976), one of the very first videogames, as a major source of influence on the making of the science fiction film \textit{Tron} (1982).\textsuperscript{166} This is evident not only from the story, which takes place inside a fictional computer system and features a cast of anthropomorphized programs, but also from the visual style of the film, which combines computer-generated images with backlit animation to create a world of clean lines, stark contrasts and fluorescent colors reminiscent of early videogame graphics and interfaces. Sequences such as the famous lightcycle chase, in which the characters have to escape a grid maze on the backs of CGI motorcycles, the ride on the “solar sailer” across the Sea of Simulation (a vast digital ocean that spawns “gridbugs,” spider-legged robotic enemies) and even the final confrontation with the main antagonist draw upon the emerging conventions and mechanics – respawning enemies, maze navigation, lightning-fast reflexes and the suspension of physical


reality – of the most popular videogames of the era.\textsuperscript{167} Whereas Lisberger’s intention was to communicate the appeal and creative exuberance of the new medium to a mass audience,\textsuperscript{168} other early game-inspired films recognized its darker potential. \textit{WarGames} (1983) strikes a more serious tone by telling the story of David, a young hacker who mistakes a Cold War military computer system for a videogame, and almost unleashes a nuclear holocaust on the world. In an interesting twist, the near-catastrophe, which was facilitated by the use of game terminology and mechanisms, is also averted with the help of a game: Using a digital version of Tic Tac Toe as an analogy, David manages to convince the computer that a nuclear strike always constitutes an unwinnable scenario, leaving it to conclude: “A strange game. The only winning move is not to play. How about a nice game of chess?”\textsuperscript{169} More recently, movies like the 2012 Disney film \textit{Wreck-It Ralph} have begun to deliberately experiment with the mechanics and structures of videogames, on a thematic as well as an artistic level. \textit{Wreck-It Ralph} is quite literally about a videogame character, the titular Ralph, who becomes dissatisfied with his designated role as the villain and manages to break out of his own arcade cabinet in order to look for a greater purpose in the virtual worlds of the neighboring arcade machines.\textsuperscript{170} Beyond its obvious theme, the film is a tribute to both recent and classic videogames: Wreck-It Ralph and his nemesis, Fix-It Felix Jr., are an homage to the widely beloved \textit{Donkey Kong} and \textit{Super Mario} franchises, in which the everyman hero, the little Italian plumber Mario, regularly outwits and defeats the hulking villains Donkey Kong (a giant ape) and Bowser (a dinosaur).

However, games do not only serve as storytelling inspirations. It is often said, with a touch of cynicism, that modern games aspire to be movies in order to share in their status as an accepted art form, e.g. by including long, non-interactive cut-scenes for narrative purposes or linear game progression (see 4.2.), but the opposite is also true. Particularly during the last vestiges of the old millennium, movies began to experiment with techniques which originated from or are most commonly utilized by videogames. As Henry Jenkins notes:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{167} Two decades later, the world of \textit{Tron} was resurrected in the videogame \textit{Kingdom Hearts II} (2005), allowing players to experience some of the movie’s climactic moments such as the lightcycle chase and the battle against the evil Master Control Program for themselves. This design choice not only further highlights the film’s creative roots, but also has the (unintended) side effect of resituating its most game-like sequences in the medium from which they once originated. \textit{Kingdom Hearts II}, dev. Square Enix (PlayStation 2: Square Enix, 2006).
\item \textsuperscript{168} Culhane.
\item \textsuperscript{169} \textit{WarGames}, dir. John Badham, MGM 1983.
\item \textsuperscript{170} \textit{Wreck-It Ralph}, dir. Rich Moore, Walt Disney Animation Studios 2012.
\end{itemize}
Games increasingly influence contemporary cinema, helping to define the frantic pace and model the multi-directional plotting of *Run Lola Run*, providing the role-playing metaphor for *Being John Malkovich*, encouraging a fascination with the slippery line between reality and digital illusions in *The Matrix*, inspiring the fascination with decipherment and puzzle solving at the heart of *Memento*, and even providing a new way of thinking about Shakespearean tragedy in *Titus*.  

Apart from this creative give-and-take, games and movies are linked on the commercial level through the creation of multimedia entertainment franchises. Henry Jenkins terms this trend “media convergence” and its effect on narrative “transmedia storytelling,” i.e. the spread of one story or fictional universe across multiple media. The creation of lucrative franchises across a multitude of media channels demands an adaptation or expansion of the source material in ways suited to each medium, yet accessible to old and new audiences alike. Films have a long-standing tradition of leveraging games as a form of merchandise meant to prolong the entertainment value of the source material. This practice dates back to the earliest days of videogames: For example, the original *Star Wars* trilogy (1977-1983) was accompanied by several officially licensed games which allowed fans to partake in iconic movie confrontations, such as Luke Skywalker’s attack on the Death Star. The popularity of the *Star Wars* films has since resulted in a so-called “expanded universe,” whose works in the form of novels, novelizations, comic books, television series and videogames explore possible continuations, what-if scenarios or indirectly related stories set in the *Star Wars* universe. Several videogames have since achieved critical acclaim in their own right, such as the 2003 BioWare RPG *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, which is set 4,000 years before the events of the films. *Star Wars* is hardly unique in this respect, since almost every major Hollywood production or popular television series (e.g. *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Iron Man*, James Cameron’s *Avatar*, *CSI*, *Lost*, or *The Sopranos*) is accompanied by a tie-in videogame. In fact, work on these tie-ins often begins during filming, a practice which has the unfortunate side-effect of frequently resulting in mediocre games due to the restrictions placed on their design (e.g. short production cycles, small budgets, lack of reference material, gag orders which prevent the inclusion of crucial plot details from the film).

Although the creation of tie-ins and adaptations often places games in the role of officially

---


licensed collectibles meant to enhance the popularity of a film, the reverse is a much more common practice in Japan due to the mass market appeal of animated feature films and television series (anime). One notable example is the .hack series (pronounced “dot hack,” 2002 to present), a multimedia franchise whose principal story is told through a combination of videogames, accompanying animated feature films and several television series. The plot of .hack revolves around a fictional MMORPG called “The World,” which is governed by a sophisticated artificial intelligence (AI). When the AI begins to develop a sense of self-awareness, a series of alarming incidents occurs: Players of “The World” fall into a coma as their consciousness becomes trapped in the game world, while the release of corrupted game data begins to affect computer systems in the real world, causing traffic accidents, power outages and other dangerous malfunctions. The combined use of game and film allows for the creation of interconnected stories which play to the strengths of their respective medium. The original four-volume .hack series of videogames (2002-2005) focuses entirely on one particular player character’s adventures in “The World” and his attempts to stem the tide of virulent data. In an interesting bit of self-reflexivity, the player assumes the role of this fictional player by controlling his game avatar, since the story completely excludes plot developments and character interaction outside of the fictional online game. The player is never able to experience the protagonist’s off-line life, or able to see the effects of the increasingly volatile AI in the outside world. In turn, the accompanying four-part animation film completely excludes the events in “The World” in order to focus on the chaos caused by the awakening AI in the “real world.” In the rare event that the protagonists log into the MMO in the animated film, the audience cannot catch a glimpse of “The World” itself – the game world is visible only to the protagonists on the inside of their virtual reality goggles. In short, the only way to experience “The World” is to play the videogame.\(^{173}\)

Furthermore, the extreme financial success of post-millennial games such as \textit{Grand Theft Auto} and \textit{Assassin’s Creed}, as well as the lasting appeal of several game series (e.g. \textit{Final Fantasy}, \textit{Resident Evil}, \textit{Prince of Persia}, \textit{Castlevania}), has prompted Hollywood filmmakers to take an interest in videogame stories and adapt them for the silver screen. Notable examples include \textit{Silent Hill} (2006), based on the titular series of survival horror games, the \textit{Lara Croft: Tomb Raider} movies (2001 and 2003) starring Angelina Jolie in the role of the Indiana Jones-inspired treasure hunter, an adaptation of \textit{Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time} (2010) starring Jake Gyllenhaal and Ben Kingsley, and five \textit{Resident Evil} movies produced between 2002 and 2012.

\(^{173}\) Another self-reflective element of the original .hack games is that they were conceived as single-player offline titles. Basically, .hack simulates the experience of playing an MMORPG without actually \textit{being} an MMORPG.
Although most of these films have not turned out to be critical darlings, their existence reveals a growing interest in games – not simply as pieces of merchandise to be sold in the wake of a successful motion picture, but as a narrative medium which has shaped the imagination of millions, and whose stories may lend themselves to theatrical adaptation.

b. Art

The question whether videogames should be considered a form of art tends to inspire heated discussion among scholars, pop culture critics, artists and connoisseurs.\(^{174}\) While this controversy is, as Jenkins suggests, often motivated by arbitrary notions of prestige and perhaps even elitism,\(^{175}\) it is undeniable that videogames are a medium for art. If one is unwilling to consider the idea that a videogame may possess aesthetic beauty, meaning or any of the other qualities commonly associated with works of art, there are certainly game components – such as the musical score or concept illustrations – which are created using established forms of art. In fact, the purpose of this section is not to engage in a debate about artistic merit, but to provide examples of the ways in which games contribute to the visual arts and are slowly being integrated into museums, galleries and cultural festivals.

As an intensely visual medium, games naturally draw on the rich palette of the visual arts – painting, sculpture, architecture – which have been developed over the centuries. Shigeru Miyamoto, one of the most influential game creators in history,\(^{176}\) refers to game designers as both artists and engineers due to the nature of the medium itself: “Another important element is a belief that creators are artists. At the same time, however, it’s necessary for us creators to be engineers, because of the skill required for the


\(^{175}\) Jenkins, “Games, the New Lively Art”: “I will admit that discussing the art of video games conjures up comic images: tuxedo-clad and jewel-bedecked patrons admiring the latest Streetfighter, middle-aged academics pontificating on the impact of Cubism on Tetris, bleeps and zaps disrupting our silent contemplation at the Guggenheim. Such images tell us more about our contemporary notion of art – as arid and stuffy, as the property of an educated and economic elite, as cut off from everyday experience – than they tell us about games.”

\(^{176}\) Shigeru Miyamoto is best known for having created some of America’s most beloved games, including the _Super Mario_, _Donkey Kong_ and _The Legend of Zelda_ series.
creations.” This is most evident in what Ernest Adams refers to as “art-driven games” – games which are meant to showcase a particular style of art or aesthetic sensibilities – which successfully combine the artwork with the mechanics of game design to create a synergistic experience. Ōkami (2006), for example, combines its retelling of Japanese myths and folklore with a visual style based upon traditional sumi-e (ink wash painting) and woodcut techniques, and integrates this artistic theme into its gameplay: The so-called “Celestial Brush” allows the player to manipulate the environment by moving a virtual calligraphy brush in certain patterns. Like a real paint brush, the technique requires a supply of virtual ink, which forces players to be both precise and economic in their strokes. The Unfinished Swan (2012) takes watercolor painting as its main theme and gameplay mechanic by setting its story inside a series of paintings and storybook illustrations. In order to navigate and discover the world, the player has to splatter different kinds of paint all over the environments in order to reveal hidden passages, create bridges, and so forth. In fact, a significant number of levels in the game are completely blank, featureless white expanses which need to be colored in order to reveal objects, shapes and textures, thus creating a world of strong contrastive colors in a style reminiscent of Jackson Pollock’s splatter paint technique. Yet another game, Puppeteer (2013), takes its inspiration and gameplay mechanics from the genres of marionette and paper-cut theater by designing and animating its levels by deliberately drawing on the use of traditional theater props, stage lighting, scenery and special effects. The player, in the role of a wooden puppet, advances through these stages by cutting various set pieces into shape with a pair of scissors, or manipulating the props, stage lighting or other theater-specific installations. In fact, the entire story of Puppeteer is conceived as a stage play, divided into scenes and acts, commented on by the characters in asides, and followed by a rapt, if invisible, audience which cheers on the player character, boos villainous characters off the stage, and reacts with laughter at the player’s mishaps.

However, games have also created and popularized new techniques and genres of art. As mentioned previously (see 2.2.), the medium is one of the biggest sources of inspiration for “game art,” a sub-genre of multimedia art which combines traditional techniques with the particular qualities of videogames to create navigable art installations designed to reflect upon real and virtual space, the role of technology and the integration of videogames into aspects of daily life. Pixel art, a type of digital mosaic, similarly originated from videogames. The technique, which uses raster graphics to build an image pixel by pixel, was first used extensively in software like Adobe’s Paintbrush and Macromedia’s Flash. Shigeru Miyamoto, qtd. in Jenkins, “Games, the New Lively Art.”

177 Shigeru Miyamoto, qtd. in Jenkins, “Games, the New Lively Art.”

pixel using a limited color palette, was devised during the late 1970s and widely used in games and graphic user interfaces until the 1990s, when the low resolution of computer screens and limited memory resources forced artists to painstakingly construct images one pixel at a time. This extreme economy of colors and shapes results in a distinctive “mottled” look which nevertheless allows for a measure of detail. Since the introduction of 3D graphics and polygonal modeling in computing, the use of pixel art in games themselves has declined sharply; yet certain contemporary titles deliberately maintain this “retro” look for nostalgic reasons, to stand out and resist the homogenization of game aesthetics. Pixel art has also become very popular among digital artists for its economic, detail-oriented creative process and high recognition value. The building-block videogame Minecraft has become a playground for amateur and professional pixel artists alike, who assemble frequently gargantuan and immensely detailed pixel art creations out of its individual blocks (the current world-record creation is comprised of 1,128,960 blocks/pixels179).

Moreover, pixel art has found applications outside the realm of computer graphics, for instance in viral marketing and various avant-garde projects such as Urban Pixels, an MIT initiative to create low-cost solar-powered lighting that can be arranged dynamically.180 One of the most prominent displays of pixel art can be found not in a modern skyscraper in the US, but in Cologne Cathedral, Germany: In 2007, the cathedral finally received a replacement for one of its famous stained-glass windows, which had been destroyed during World War II. The design, conceived by German artist Gerhard Richter, consists of no less than 11,500 glass squares, whose palette of 72 colors creates a dazzling display of light in the style of a pixel art palette.181

Apart from their influence on the digital and abstract art scene, as well as the considerable amount of memorabilia in the form of conceptual design collections, promotional paintings, miniatures and sculptures, fashion and jewelry, professional art galleries and museums in the US have begun to take an interest in the documentation and preservation of gaming (art) history. Until relatively recently, this was largely an effort pursued by private enthusiasts, whose storerooms and garages were home to a salmagundi of game cartridges, conceptual artwork, consoles and accessories, and gaming publications, or who started


large-scale online projects like the Video Game Museum in order to document and organize gaming history. Due to the rising public awareness of and interest in games, however, a growing number of galleries and state-funded museums have begun to house traveling art exhibits on the subject, or even construct permanent facilities to house collections of their own. Among them is the International Center for the History of Electronic Games in Rochester, New York, which exists as part of the Strong National Museum of Play and houses more than 25,000 objects ranging from games and platforms to their electronic predecessors, game-related publications and consumer products inspired by games. Artscape, one of the largest free arts festivals in the US, has recently added BetaScape to its repertoire in order to include technological exhibits, workshops and events, an arcade hall and a videogame showcase. The eminent Smithsonian American Art Museum launched the exhibition *The Art of Videogames* in March 2012, citing their “unprecedented method of communicating with and engaging audiences” as the motivation for dedicating floor space to the new medium. In an effort to create a diverse experience, the Smithsonian conducted public polls prior to the exhibition in order to allow players to weigh in on the games which would be presented in depth – among them historical milestones like *Pac-Man*, *Donkey Kong*, *Tomb Raider*, and *Final Fantasy VII* as well as more recent games like *Minecraft* and *Shadow of the Colossus*. The fact that games are moving out of the garages and closets of American gamers and into their eminent museums is one of the strongest statements in the continued art-and-merit debate. At the very least, the decision to display and explore videogame art in large-scale collections open to the public acknowledges both the fact that they have become a medium of artistic expression and the fact that their wide-spread influence – whether directly or indirectly – makes the organization of such exhibits profitable.

c. Music

When Christopher Tin’s composition “Baba Yetu,” the theme song to the videogame *Civilization IV*, became the very first piece of videogame music to win one of the prestigious Grammy Awards in 2011

---

(exactly eleven years after game music was first admitted for participation), enthusiasts felt equal parts vindicated and confused: vindicated because games have been set to music easily as opulent and moving as any film soundtrack composition, and confused because *Civilization IV*, and Tin’s theme music, were already six years old by that point (the game was released in late 2005). In fact, Chris Kohler speculates that the song never would have been nominated in the first place had it not found its way onto an album not burdened with the label of “videogame music.” However, only a year later, Austin Wintory’s score for the 2012 game *Journey* was nominated as a proper videogame soundtrack in the newly renamed “Music for Visual Media” category (formerly listed “Film, Television and Other Visual Media”), next to film scores by eminent Hollywood composers like John Williams, Howard Shore and Hans Zimmer. Clearly, the tides are changing.

Game music has come a long way since its sterile, discordant beginnings, when only electronic beeps and clicks were available to enhance a mood or atmosphere. With the evolution of sound technology in computers and consoles, composers have begun to write soundtracks as sweeping and illustrative as any film score. In a 2008 *New York Times* article, Vivien Schweitzer points to the transformations game music has undergone since its humble beginnings, growing from a genre that “felt like a throwaway for composers who couldn’t get work elsewhere,” to a genre performed by philharmonic orchestras around the world, even attracting famous film composers like Danny Elfman (*Fable* series) and Hans Zimmer (*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*). The different demands of game music, so Schweitzer, are what makes it so attractive to traditionally educated composers; and indeed, creating strong impressions and statements rather than providing mere backdrop is one of the characteristics of game music. Contrary to the genre conventions that have long since dictated music choices in film, videogames are free to experiment and draw on the entire spectrum of musical styles: classical orchestra and choirs, pop and

---


rock, opera and ethnic music, avant-garde or even fusions between them. It is not unusual for composers to write music that contradicts the setting or defies traditional choices for the genre. The medieval fantasy worlds of the Tales of series that are accompanied by fast-paced keyboard and electric guitar riffs, the underwater science fiction world of BioShock that is set to chaotic and ominous orchestral pieces reminiscent of Rachmaninoff, or the World War I era setting of Shadow Hearts that is accentuated by ethnic chants and industrial rock demonstrate not only the versatility and imagination of game composers, but also open new possibilities for thinking about, combining and using music to greater effect. Although the sale of soundtracks is still in its infancy in America – compilations like Videogames Live Vol. 1 and Level 2 are an exception rather than the norm – it is standard practice in Japan, granting composers like Nobuo Uematsu (Final Fantasy series), Yasunori Mitsuda and Yoshitaka Hirota (Chrono Trigger and the Shadow Hearts series), or Motoi Sakuraba (Tales of series) the status of celebrities who tour the country with their own bands or orchestras. The increasing demand for videogame music in the USA and elsewhere in the world has resulted in several overseas concert tours, in addition to larger-scale, general game-themed events that remix and reinvent music from a variety of bestselling games. Examples include the American tours of Nobuo Uematsu, notably “Dear Friends: Music from Final Fantasy” performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra in 2004 and the world-wide “Distant Worlds: Music from Final Fantasy,” which began touring in 2007. More general concerts like Videogames Live, which debuted at the Los Angeles Hollywood Bowl in 2005, or “Play! A Videogame Symphony,” which opened in Chicago in 2006, combine music from many different games, including Metal Gear Solid, World of Warcraft, The Elder Scrolls and Daytona USA.

Apart from achieving sufficient popularity to inspire their own concert tours and events, games also provide a source of inspiration to hobby composers and other artists. Players, too, often try their hand at interpreting game music, not simply by learning an instrument in order to replay their favorite songs (although Schweitzer credits game music with inspiring more American children to expand their musical horizons), but by constantly reinventing beloved game soundtracks through remixing, i.e. rendering them in different styles or combining them with other songs. Online projects like OverClocked ReMix provide enthusiasts with a platform to share their reinterpretations with other fans, leading to creative and unusual rearrangements of even the most minimalist game music, such as the Tetris

and *Super Mario Bros.* themes, which are characterized by their short, repetitive structure and tinny quality (due to the technological limitations of 1980s consoles). Even the clumsy bleeping noises of the early era of videogames have not disappeared entirely; rather, their unusual sound has become the charm point of an entire musical genre. Chiptunes, a genre of music created from the idiosyncratic electronic warbling produced by the audio microchips in early computers and game consoles, have not only become a popular pastime among players, but have influenced other genres such as synthpop, techno, rave and club music. Similarly, MIDI music enjoyed considerable popularity due to its use in early videogames. Like chiptunes, MIDI is not defined by a specific musical arrangement or style, but rather by the use of the specific encoding standard MIDI (an acronym for Musical Instrument Digital Interface), which sends musical “instructions” (i.e. tones and tonal sequences) to be played simultaneously by different instruments such as synthesizers, sequencers and samplers. Since MIDI, in its earliest form, relied not on pre-recorded tracks but rather the live transmission of these instructions, the music could adapt to the player’s behavior on the fly (e.g. by speeding up near the end of a looming time limit or switching into an ominous-sounding minor key to signify imminent character death). Although MIDI music has since become supplanted by other advancements in audio technology – most games now stream pre-recorded musical tracks – it remains alive at music festivals, night-clubs and in various subcultures (e.g. the rave scene) as part of live music and visual performances.

These examples show that videogames, both past and present, continue to exert a particular pull on modern music genres, sub- and event cultures. It is primarily due to its initial limitations that game music has been able to achieve such a high degree of diversity, and although one could make the claim that the advancement of technology has adversely affected its uniqueness and avant-garde creativity, it has also inspired, popularized and kept alive certain styles and methods of composition which might have never have achieved the same level of exposure otherwise.

3.3.2. Games and Areas of Daily Life

a. Business and Marketing

As has been mentioned before, videogames are big business. In 2014, Americans spent $15.4 billion on games alone – and a total of $22.41 billion (including the purchase of games, hardware and accessories) – a figure which has skyrocketed from a “mere” $7 billion in 2003. However, games are not only influential because of their astronomical sales figures and immense market value. For the past five years, “gamification” has been the buzzword in the world of business and marketing, a peculiar term that refers to the application of (video)game elements – e.g. levels, experience points, scores and score-based rewards – to non-game contexts like finance, healthcare, traffic, voting, business-consumer relationships, work productivity, and many others, with the goal of making these activities, areas or systems more fun, engaging, and effective. At first, the concept sounds ludicrous – how can videogame principles help to improve behavior in traffic, for example? Are videogames like Grand Theft Auto not known for turning traffic into a choreographed ballet of car wrecks, with vehicles pirouetting into each other and exploding in a shower of virtual pyrotechnics? To this one can reply, yes, certainly, to a degree – but this is not the kind of paradigm which gamification seeks to export to the real world. As Jane McGonigal explains in Reality Is Broken, games elicit fundamentally positive emotions:

Games make us happy because they are hard work that we choose for ourselves, and it turns out that almost nothing makes us happier than good, hard work. [...] When we’re playing a good game – when we’re tackling unnecessary obstacles – we are actively moving ourselves toward the positive end of the emotional spectrum. We are intensely engaged, and this puts us in precisely the right frame of mind and physical condition to generate all kinds of positive emotions and experiences. All of the neurological and physiological systems that underlie happiness – our attention systems, our reward center, our motivation systems, our emotion and memory centers – are fully activated by gameplay.

The goal is not to export videogame themes or the “negotiable consequences” of play, as Juul calls them, but to take some of the methods, rules and systems that make (video)games so satisfying and apply them to the real world in order to encourage positive behavioral change. To return to the example of traffic, a

---

194 Entertainment Software Association.


196 McGonigal 28.

197 Juul 36.
A host of tried-and-true methods exists to encourage drivers to follow the rules: stop signs, speed limits, traffic lights, and, of course, the ultimate “incentive” of punishment in the form of tickets and fines. However, plenty of people still do not adhere to the rules, and sometimes the rules are rather aggravating and dissatisfying when one is forced to creep along at twenty miles an hour so as to avoid spooking the mere possibility of a pedestrian. In contrast, gamification proposes systems that are geared towards immediate feedback and positive reinforcement in the form of rewards, e.g. via monitoring equipment that translates driver behavior into a points score which can then be shared and compared to other participants’ scores on social media. The reward, in this case, is purely emotional and functions on the same principle as videogame leaderboards – tallies which rank players according to particular criteria, e.g. character level, high score, certain play styles – which allow players to compare their score against others’ and feel good about how much they have improved.

While the gamification of traffic is still highly experimental, other areas such as marketing and venture capitalism have already embraced the concept fully. In the realm of business-consumer relations, for example, specifically designed smartphone apps reward customers for their real-world behavior by allowing them to gain access to various privileges. One of the most ingenious representatives of such apps is Foursquare, which allows users to share their shopping experiences with acquaintances across various social networks. The app broadcasts users’ visits to stores, restaurants, hotels, and other businesses in a given location, and allows them to exchange opinions and tips with others. Foursquare rewards its users’ patronage to businesses with virtual achievement badges based on where, when and how much they shop, and how often they use the service. The badges themselves possess no material value, and exist primarily to encourage users to shop and promote locations via Foursquare. Just like in a videogame, users level up depending on their actions – in this case, how often they visit certain establishments. If a person happens to have visited a location more than any other Foursquare user in the area, they are nominated “the mayor” and may become eligible for discounts. In this manner, Foursquare and vendors who have realized its advantages use videogame features to encourage consumption and direct users to certain businesses to great effect. Despite the fact that most of Foursquare’s rewards are purely virtual and not

---

comparable to traditional loyalty benefits, the app has attracted more than 45 million registered users worldwide. According to McGonigal, the appeal of such platforms is that they foster positive emotions, because “to do well in Foursquare, you have to enjoy yourself more. You have to frequent your favorite places more often, try things you’ve never tried before, go places you’ve never been, and meet up more often with friends for whom you might not ordinarily make time to see in person.” The platform is not (just) attractive because it offers opportunities to receive discounts, but because it turns shopping into a more social experience and provides the incentive to change one’s consumer behavior by shopping locally.

However, gamification is not as easy as assigning a set amount of experience points to a task, and its widespread implementation could lead to problems further down the road. Although no organized studies exist, some journalists and critics warn of oversaturation – the mindless application of gamification principles to areas or tasks that either do not need them or are ill-suited for them – and the very real possibility of abuse. Camille Ricketts, a journalist at the online technology magazine VentureBeat, offers a more critical perspective; according to her, gamification also implies increased data collection (or data hoarding) on individual users, and the use or abuse of data to drive profits, for example in the context of health insurance:

> If people have the opportunity to earn points for eating healthier – or, alternatively, can be punished for eating junk food – they will probably be more likely to stick to a beneficial nutrition plan. Considering that supermarkets know everything you buy after they scan it, it’s not inconceivable that health insurance costs could one day be connected with food purchases.

In other words, those who do not embrace gamification or do not use it for continuous self-improvement may be put at a disadvantage for quite literally refusing to “play the game.”

Although a portion of the current enthusiasm can almost certainly be attributed to the fact that gamification is a strange, new and potentially gainful concept, it is doubtful that it will merely fizzle out and disappear like so many other short-lived trends have done in the past. After all, the namesake of gamification and its inspiration – videogames – has the ability to make millions of people collectively

---


200 McGonigal 166.

spend billions of man-hours on the improvement of entirely virtual characters and worlds. It does not take much to imagine what the mechanics behind this kind of phenomenal – and freely chosen – effort might move in the real world, if adapted and applied properly.

b. Education and Research

Although videogames are often regarded with mixed feelings where their educational value is concerned, they have paradoxically gained a considerable amount of trust by donning a metaphorical pair of glasses and a fancy hat: Edugames, i.e. videogames designed with the express purpose of fostering educational goals (usually in school subjects like mathematics, languages, or the natural sciences), have been a popular way of supplementing children’s studies and bridging the gaps left by the long educational dry spells of the major school holidays since the late 1980s. By now, they can be found in almost all areas where important but complex information has to be conveyed – in museums, libraries, the websites of organizations or science institutions seeking to spread knowledge and encourage participation. National Geographic offers browser games and apps designed to allow (young) users to explore architectural marvels, learn about what the world looks like underneath an electron microscope, or build “green” cities. Similarly, the official website of the Nobel Prize offers a small host of browser games to foster awareness and understanding of the work of Nobel laureates with regard to topics such as immunology, human rights, or the workings of lasers. In fact, even the White House has recently begun to use videogames in order to encourage young Americans to pursue a career in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). The “Educate to Innovate” initiative has launched the National STEM Game Design Competition, which harnesses the technology and influence of influential videogame publishers and organizations like the Entertainment Software Association to design non-profit games for children with a focus on raising STEM competences. According to the White House press release, the initiative does not only develop explicitly educational games for social networks and mobile devices, but also builds on existing popular videogames like LittleBigPlanet (an exploratory puzzle game which allows users to

202 McGonigal extrapolates from user data that people worldwide have collectively spent 50 billion hours, or 5.93 million years, playing the MMORPG World of Warcraft (52). Although she admits that measuring play hours in an MMO is anything but precise, “even with a margin of error of as much as 50 percent, we’re still talking about gameplay on the magnitude of millions of years” (367).


create and share their own level designs online). This decision falls in line with what game scholars have argued since the 1980s, namely that videogames are capable of inducing “flow states,” which are “state[s] of optimal experience, whereby a person is so engaged in activity that self-consciousness disappears, time becomes distorted, and people engage in complex, goal-directed activity not for external rewards, but for simply the exhilaration of doing.” Researchers like Henry Jenkins, Kurt Squire, and James Paul Gee as well as game designers like Will Wright are firm advocates of the learning benefits of videogames in general, but argue that instructors and teachers need to develop particular literacy skills in order to understand their mechanics and effectively employ them in classroom situations.

However, the influence of videogames on educational settings is beginning to extend further. Several pilot projects have embraced the gamification of education – the application of videogame design principles to school curricula, classroom facilities, and teaching methods – in order to try and solve some of the problems of the current American education system, such as the high student dropout rate. Some educators look to videogames in order to reduce testing anxiety and increase student motivation, for example by replacing grades – at least nominally – with an experience points system: Instead of collecting grades via tests and pop quizzes, students accumulate experience points and “level up” when they reach a certain threshold. As Joey Lee and Jessica Hammer propose, such a rearrangement of the way schoolwork is understood and assessed can change the way children understand their role as students:

Gamification projects offer the opportunity to experiment with rules, emotions, and social roles. Read an optional library book on the topic being taught in class? Receive “Reading” points. Get perfect attendance and complete all homework assignments on time for a month? Earn an “On Target” badge. Get assigned as a “Lead Detective” role in science class? Work hard to ask the best questions. When playing by these rules,

---


students develop new frameworks for understanding their school-based activities. [...] this can motivate students to participate more deeply and change their self-concept as learners.209

Two particularly ambitious projects are the Quest to Learn middle school in New York City, which opened its doors in 2009 and has since expanded to include the upper grades, and the Chicago Quest School, opened in 2011. Structured according to the principles of “game-like learning,” both schools have not only added videogames and game design to their arsenal of teaching tools, but are setting out to remodel the way school education is understood and learning takes place. Among other things, videogames treat failure as iteration – a player who fails to master a challenge simply tries again after rethinking their strategy, whereas failure in the real world is often understood as a personal disgrace or even a moral blemish, something which these gamified schools seek to reduce.210 The curriculum is also modified so that lessons and tasks employ a structure similar to videogame quests, which require the player to develop and hone a considerable number of skills, often simultaneously. Although the specifics vary strongly from game to game (and even from quest to quest in the same game), they all require players to gather information, develop and test out strategies, manage their time and resources, to cooperate and/or negotiate with other players or NPCs, to assess risks, make spontaneous use of randomly generated elements (e.g. weather, terrain, obstacles), and, of course, if at first they don’t succeed, to try, try again. Similarly, students at Quest to Learn are faced with tasks and lessons which require them to “plan, collect data, create theories, test their results, and document outcomes [...]” as well as “to analyze, build, and modify many different kinds of dynamic systems – historical, physical, mathematical, technological, scientific, written, and social”211 in order to advance and grow. Although it remains to be seen whether these projects will prove fruitful and become applicable on a wider scale, the fact remains that the kind of learning experiences provided and encouraged by videogames are powerful enough to inspire educators to take their principles out of their playful virtual worlds and put them into one of the most serious places on Earth: the school system.

Apart from their use as teaching and learning enhancements, videogames have also begun to alter how scientific research is conducted and knowledge is disseminated – a fitting development, considering

209 Lee and Hammer 2.
211 Salen et al. 16.
that the medium itself originally emerged from a research context. In areas of research where vast amounts of data must be processed and sorted, where tedious, repetitive tasks are required to achieve the desired results, or where other challenges loom which cannot be handled by traditional research teams, games are already proving to be an invaluable tool which lightens the workload considerably. One example is the browser game *Foldit*, launched by the University of Washington in 2008 in order to analyze the structure of medically significant proteins. After numerous failures to fold the desired proteins into workable shapes using traditional methods, the university created a game which pits groups of untrained volunteer players against each other to try and fold the proteins as perfectly as possible by making use of in-game tools. The closer to perfection a structure is, the higher its score, encouraging tens of thousands of players to aim for the top. *Foldit* and its players have achieved remarkable success: In 2011, players helped to unravel the crystal structure of a critical enzyme in the Mason-Pfizer monkey virus, which causes HIV/AIDS in humans, a discovery of immense worth for the creation of anti-retroviral drugs. The enzyme, which had stumped researchers for close to 15 years, was fully deciphered by *Foldit*’s nearly 60,000 players in only ten days.\(^{212}\) Since then, *Foldit* has contributed to the deciphering and even the redesign of proteins relevant to fields such as Alzheimer and cancer research, or biofuel development.\(^{213}\) Other examples of projects which use videogames to solve scientific problems and/or aid in scientific discovery include *Phylo*, a puzzle game in which players align the DNA of various animal species in order to search for mutated genes which may cause diseases, *Eyewire*, a project meant to uncover how the brain is wired by tasking players with detangling cubes of brain matter in order to uncover individual nerve structures, or *Cropland Capture*, in which players participate in the creation of a so-called global “crop map” by scanning satellite images for arable land, which scientists use to estimate worldwide food resources and to plan for possible shortages.

Apart from these specialized science games, videogames produced purely for entertainment are also finding uses in a variety of fields. For instance, *Grand Theft Auto V*, which, as its title suggests, revolves around fast cars and criminal activities, is currently used to train the artificial intelligences in


control of self-driving cars. The game is of interest not because of its driving physics or its endless possibilities for wreaking vehicular mayhem, but because of its virtual world: a vast, realistic three-dimensional city with intricate road networks and randomized objects, many of which exhibit unique emergent behavior and respond to the player’s actions (e.g. vehicles, animals and vegetation, gates and fences, pedestrians and cyclists, traffic lights, road signs, obstacles, weather and lighting conditions, etc).\textsuperscript{214} This intricate virtual world is ideal for developing the algorithms of self-driving cars, which require vast quantities of data in order to learn how to perform a particular task or how to categorize particular objects. Using \textit{Grand Theft Auto V} and other, similar driving and racing videogames to obtain the necessary amount of data is much more economical and less labor-intensive than sending research staff into the field in order to take hundreds of thousands of pictures and videos, all in varying environmental conditions (e.g. rain, nighttime, fog), in order to properly teach the algorithms.

These examples illustrate that one of the more curious aspects of games – their ability to make us fail and yet encourage us to try again and again without fear or shame – can be harnessed to powerful effect. Even though a layperson playing videogames (or tens of thousands of laypersons) can never replace a trained scientist when it comes to interpreting, describing and validating these potential discoveries, the layperson’s game-inspired tenacity can go a long way towards ensuring that the scientists receive workable data in the first place.

c. Social Issues and Activism

Given that videogames are used as learning tools and designed with the express purpose of imparting lessons in algebra or chemistry, it is not much of a stretch to imagine them being used to similar effect in the promotion of political and social causes. And indeed, this is already the case. Robert Jones argues that since activism is interested in altering the status quo and providing fresh, new perspectives, and is thus constantly forced to be ever more creative at conveying its message, “[h]arnessing the power of videogame technology for activist pursuits only marks the next logical step of adaptability to a constantly evolving

There are an astounding number of ways in which the medium is used to aid activist causes, although it can be argued that some are more effective than others. For example, some games around a particular social issue or cause combine a relatively straightforward task (e.g. cleaning up environmental pollution) with information and other educational materials on the issue in question, and encourage the player to take action in the real world, i.e. by donating to charity or driving legislation intended to improve the situation. Others take a more emotion-based approach by seeking to foster an empathetic awareness through role-play: For instance, most games hosted on Games for Change, a website (and organization) dedicated to nurturing and expanding the field of “social impact games,” invite the player to put themselves in the shoes of a fictional character in order to gain a more personal insight into an issue with which they might otherwise not engage. One example is Mission US, a story-driven game in which players select one of several characters to gain greater insight into chapters of US history and the various social problems of a period. In one episode, the player assumes the role of a young Russian Jewish immigrant during the Ellis Island era of immigration, and influences the turns her story takes by making choices, akin to a choose-your-own-adventure novel. The stated goals of the game are to teach historical awareness, understand the struggle for civil rights and freedom on American soil, and allow players to “develop historical empathy.” Other games aim to shock or prove a point rather than fulfilling an educational purpose. In September 12th: A Toy World (2003), the player is placed in charge of tactical missiles and given the task of eradicating the terrorists hiding in a fictional Middle Eastern town. Not only is the player liable to destroy homes and public buildings and take the lives of civilians, given the imprecise nature of missile strikes, but they are quickly made to realize that there is no reward for completing their assigned mission – or, indeed, even the possibility of completion. Every act of destruction and murder brings grieving citizens to the scene, some of which are driven to transform into terrorists by their anger and despair. The player drives the game to its cynical conclusion by electing to keep aiming missiles at the town until everything is in ruins and every single citizen has been transformed. September 12th does not provide answers or solutions; in fact, its creators describe it as a simulation instead of a game because “you can’t win and you can’t lose. [...] It has no ending. It has already begun. The rules are deadly simple.

---


You can shoot. Or not.” Still other types of social impact games work by placing the player in a position of profound moral ambiguity. Unlike a game like Mission US, whose primary purpose is to educate, or September 12th, which puts the player in a position that is difficult to justify from the outset in order to make a particular ideological statement (i.e. “the war on terrorism creates more terrorists”), games like This War of Mine (2014) create scenarios in which the player is forced to make decisions where there is no obvious moral high ground. In This War of Mine, players assume the position of leader of a group of civilian refugees who are trying to stay alive in a ruined, war-torn city. Hiding in a former apartment building, the refugees (under direction from the player) must scavenge for direly needed food and medical supplies, try to fend off bands of marauders, and find ways to cope with the mental toll of the horrific wartime conditions. Each decision the player has to make comes at a heavy price, since the refugees are vulnerable everyday people: Fighting back against looters and pillagers may lead to grave physical injuries; driving them off means they might come back again later at any time, but killing an attacker in self-defense is liable to leave the survivors guilt-ridden and traumatized. However, an attempt at pacifism (i.e. simply ordering the refugees to hide during a raid) is bound to leave the refugees even more destitute than before, incurring illness and starvation. There are no “right” choices, as the promotional text for the game spells out quite plainly:

This War of Mine provides an experience of war seen from an entirely new angle. For the very first time you do not play as an elite soldier, rather [as] a group of civilians trying to survive in a besieged city. During the day snipers outside stop you from leaving your refuge, so you need to focus on maintaining your hideout. At night you get a chance to scavenge nearby locations for items that will help you stay alive. Make life-and-death decisions driven by your conscience. Try to protect everybody from your shelter or sacrifice some of them to endure the hardships. During war, there are no good or bad decisions; there is only survival. The sooner you realize that, the better.  

By placing the player in a situation where it is impossible to adopt a heroic role or make choices that are easily morally defensible, the game attaches an emotional cost to “winning,” or rather, surviving: Although it is possible to survive successfully for long periods of time (unlike in September 12th), the player has to – however temporarily – live with the decisions that have earned them this “success,” knowing that their actions (or inaction) have burdened or outright destroyed the characters in their care, e.g. that their

---


decision not to steal medicine from an elderly couple may have allowed said couple to survive but cost lives among the player’s own group of characters, or that the decision to retaliate against and kill a hostile character has driven the defender to suicide. Although This War of Mine can be understood as a reaction against the glorification of warfare in general, it is an interesting counterpoint to the portrayal of warfare in videogames, in particular, since most war-themed games (e.g. Medal of Honor, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, Battlefield, America’s Army) assign to the players the role of a heroic soldier who is able to easily dispatch his enemies: It deliberately refrains from rendering war as a power fantasy, which provides a sorely necessary counterpoint in a market saturated with heroic war stories.

At times, even mainstream videogames are co-opted into activist causes, since their popularity is likely to reach a wider audience and inspire discussion or generate controversy. This practice is, at best, legally dubious, since it runs the risk of violating copyright and/or associating the game in question with topics and issues which its developer never intended. The animal rights organization PETA, for example, appropriates the look, theme and mechanics of the popular cooking simulation Cooking Mama (2006) into a strange type of parody entitled Cooking Mama: Mama Kills Animals. Whereas the original game is light-hearted, colorful and rated for all ages, featuring cute cartoon characters and stylized preparation methods, the PETA edition turns the character of Cooking Mama (formerly the player’s friendly cooking instructor) into a ruthless, bloodthirsty sadist who gleefully kills and graphically butchers a Thanksgiving turkey in a shower of blood and innards. Once the player, in the role of Cooking Mama, has gruesomely prepared the Thanksgiving meal, the character of Cooking Mama has a change of heart and converts to veganism, whereupon the player learns how to prepare a tofu turkey and use non-animal-based products in cooking. Upon completing the game, the player unlocks links to videos of turkeys being led to slaughter and a call to action that encourages players to persuade the original game’s publisher Majesco to release a vegan-themed Cooking Mama game instead.219 Despite the legally dubious appropriation of the game, the publisher chose to respond with gentle humor in the voice of Cooking Mama: “I would never put rat in my Ratatouille. Like any accomplished cook, I create my recipes to appeal to a broad range of tastes and preferences. My only goal is to ensure you leave the table well fed.”220

These examples of programs and organizations utilizing games to educate are but a few in a sea of hundreds, if not thousands. The unique features of games that facilitate learning through interactivity and exploration of choices not only make them an increasingly attractive support to classroom learning or training, but also as platforms for advocacy because, unlike posters, manuals or videos, games actively prompt their players to perform certain actions and require them to make decisions, and allow them to directly experience the consequences of those actions – albeit “only” in virtual form.

d. Health and Health Care
Traditionally, videogames have been viewed as a source and/or contributing factor to a variety of health problems, including childhood obesity, attention deficit disorders and social reclusion, an image which has been criticized by game scholars for some time. For instance, Henry Jenkins seeks to mitigate these concerns by pointing to the overarching societal changes which contribute to an environment that encourages indoor play behavior in children. Many of the phenomena linked to videogames, Jenkins argues, in fact have their origins in the increased urbanization, “child-free” attitudes in housing communities, and a growing fear of American parents to see their children roaming the neighborhood without proper supervision, all of which limit children’s play spaces and creative possibilities. Nevertheless, games have begun to shed their negative public image by finding increasing use in various medical and health-related fields, ranging from geriatrics to psychotherapy.

One of the most immediate applications lies in the marketing of videogames as gymnastics and physical fitness devices. This effort dates back to the 1980s, when console manufacturers first sought to develop alternative input methods to enhance the play experience, experimenting with voice commands, pressure sensors and motion sensor technology. Although the initial products suffered from high retail costs and poor performance, they have since become a staple in modern gaming. A growing number of games incorporate support for motion sensing input devices like the Kinect (Microsoft) and PlayStation Move (Sony), encouraging gamers to use their whole body during play. Additionally, several developers have pioneered combinations of games with multi-purpose exercise equipment, like the Wii Fit bundle (Nintendo), Dance Dance Revolution (Konami) or EA Sports Active (Electronic Arts), to extreme commercial success. Although inquiries into possible health benefits largely focus on neurological aspects of

221 Jenkins, “Complete Freedom of Movement.”
videogame play (e.g. hand-eye coordination or spatial cognition), a growing number of studies reports a positive effect of fitness- and sports-oriented games on exercise routines and health behavior. A Canadian joint study conducted by the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria in 2007 reports that combining exercise regimens with videogame play significantly improves exercise adherence in both quantity and regularity. Researchers attribute this to the additional stimulation (challenge, immediate feedback) provided by videogame play, which combats feelings of boredom and disinterest associated with traditional exercise. In their review of existing literature on health-related behavioral change and games, Baranowski et al. go even further by suggesting that a compelling story may contribute to the effectiveness of games promoting health-related concepts like dieting and physical exercise due to their “immersive, attention-maintaining properties” and “vicarious identifying experiences”:

Novelists and screenwriters may intuitively know how to tailor a story to maximize the involvement of an audience, but behavioral scientists likely do not. Research on how best to use the three-act structure to design games offers the possibility of enhancing effective behavior-change programming. Research on why audiences expect these story conventions offers the possibility of innovative approaches to the use of stories with new structures in behavior change gaming.222

The advantages identified by Baranowski et al. account for the growing usage of games in governmental and independent health initiatives all across America to counteract the damage wrought by poor nutrition, excessive dieting, a lack of exercise or in order to facilitate and enhance the treatment of long-term illnesses. Examples include the Apps for Healthy Kids competition sponsored by the US Department of Agriculture, which enlists the creative skills of software and game developers to create games aimed at encouraging children to adopt healthier lifestyles in order to combat the problem of childhood obesity, or the Games for Health project, founded in 2004, which hosts annual conferences uniting leading game developers and healthcare professionals to “foster the awareness, education and development of games that make a positive impact on the health of communities and healthcare.”223

Yet, even games not designed for the express purpose of addressing health issues offer a wide range of benefits in several areas of health care. Pamela Kato of the University Medical Center Utrecht states that commercial videogames can fulfill a supporting function in the treatment of a wide range of


illnesses as well as the training of surgeons, as they hone speed and hand-eye coordination necessary for complex procedures such as laparoscopic surgery. The therapeutic applications, so Kato, include the alleviation of nausea during cancer therapy, pain and anxiety management, as well as physiotherapy. This is supported by a number of pioneer programs concerned with the treatment of phobias and PTSD which employ a number of gaming assets like modified game portions and virtual reality technology to create scenarios for exposure therapy. Gamberini et al. report a number of health institutions which have launched game- and VR-supported programs to improve, among many others, the cognitive processes in schizophrenia patients, the rehabilitation of stroke victims, and the treatment of war veterans. Apart from these applications in patient care, Kato reports that commercial videogames are beneficial to developing the skills of doctors, particularly visual acuity and fine motor skills, since certain games demand quick as well as precise reactions and have the player navigate complex 3-D environments. A considerable number of studies have found a correlation between the surgeons’ gaming habits and the accuracy and speed with which they master instruments like laparoscopic simulators and even carry out actual surgeries. More refined studies have uncovered that there is indeed a causal relationship between a surgeon’s videogame experience and an enhancement in their surgical skills. Kato reports of one 2009 study in particular which demonstrates that the types of skills honed or acquired strongly depend on the type of game:

In this study (Schlickum, Hedman, Enochsson, Kjellin, & Felländer-Tsai, 2009), medical students were randomly assigned to one of three groups. For a total of 5 weeks, one group of participants \( (n = 15) \) underwent systematic training with the video game \textit{Half-Life}, a 3-D first-person shooter game; another group underwent training with a 2-D non-first-person shooter game called \textit{Chessmaster}. These two groups were asked to play between 30 and 60 min a day, 5 days a week, for 5 weeks. The control group participants were asked to refrain from playing any video games at all for 5 weeks. At follow-up, both video game training groups showed significant improvements on the MIST-VR simulator, whereas those in the control group showed none at all. Only the \textit{Half-Life} group showed improvements on another surgical endoscopy task on the GI Mentor simulator. The enhanced skills shown by the \textit{Half-Life} group were thought to be due to

---


226 Kato 118.
the high visual spatial skill demands of this game and its visual similarity to endoscopy. This suggests that the content and demands of video games are important for a transfer to surgical skills to occur.227

However, videogames are at their most interesting when they allow for an unexpected insight into human behavior during extreme situations. The MMORPG *World of Warcraft* has provided such an unintentional window due to a simple programming error, which led the game to become the focus of epidemiology research. The calamitous in-game event, colloquially known as the “Corrupted Blood Incident,” unfolded in 2005, when the developer, Blizzard Entertainment, introduced an upgrade to the popular online game. This included a new dungeon and boss battle, during which the boss character would cast a special magic spell on the player characters. Called “Corrupted Blood,” the spell was meant to be nothing more than a handicap to players in taking down the enemy: It dealt severe damage to a player character’s hit points and even acted like a contagion, passing from “infected” player characters to “healthy” player characters whenever they interacted. Although the spell was supposed to only work in this specific area of the game world, players soon came to realize that “Corrupted Blood” could escape to the wider world of Azeroth: If an “infected” player chose to teleport out of the dungeon and back to one of the busy virtual cities, the spell was transferred along with them. Even worse, NPCs (non-player characters) and virtual pets could become “asymptomatic” carriers of the spell, transferring it to unwitting players. What followed was a catastrophic virtual epidemic as the spell was passed along like a highly contagious, deadly disease, instantly killing low-level characters and slowly draining the stronger ones. In a matter of hours, the infection began to resemble a real-world pandemic by spreading across the individual *World of Warcraft* servers and affecting roughly four million users. Players later reported scenes of devastation resembling large-scale disasters, of cities filled with nothing but virtual corpses: Similar to real-world occurrences and behavior, some players tried to help their comrades by healing them or organizing a virtual exodus to clean servers, while others chose to flee to uninfected areas of the game world, and still others began to find entertainment in spreading the disease.228 (Although the latter, in particular, may seem like “typical” videogame behavior – i.e. players experimenting with the limits of a system by interfering with it in unexpected ways – there are real-world precedents for the deliberate spreading of

227 Kato 118.
illnesses, like the infamous Mary Mallon [1869-1938], also known as “Typhoid Mary,” an asymptomatic carrier of typhoid fever who knowingly spread the disease to at least 51 people during her time as a cook in the New York City area. Eventually, a hard reset of the affected servers was necessary to quarantine the effects of the spell. Since then, the “Corrupted Blood Incident” has become of considerable interest to epidemiologists and even bioterrorism researchers, since it offers insight into a scenario (the spread of a pandemic and those who deliberately perpetuate it) that cannot be accurately modeled and tested since standard computer simulations are too mathematically governed to allow for the drawing of conclusions about human behavior during the outbreak of a highly infectious disease. Blizzard Entertainment, however, remains skeptical of these attempts and cautions against the use of World of Warcraft to study intensely serious real-world issues like the formation of bio-terrorism cells: “As we have always stated, World of Warcraft is first and foremost a game. It's never been designed to mirror reality or anything in the real world.”

Given all these (and many more) medical and health care-related uses of videogames, both deliberate and unintentional, it becomes difficult to continue framing them as mere wastes of time with nothing but profoundly negative effects on the people who play them. At the very least, these examples show that further research into the relationship between videogames and the real world, their benefits and drawbacks, are direly necessary if we want to understand them better and use them more effectively.

3.4. Summing up

The previous sections have given an overview of the status of videogames in US-American society and culture. They have drawn a sketch of a medium that is as enthusiastically embraced and celebrated as it is a source of worry and confusion: hailed as a wellspring of creativity and innovation, yet painted as a serious threat to social order and moral integrity. Above all, it is a medium that, due to its newness and complexity, offers tremendous opportunities for academic research. In the context of the present work, this is doubly true: Not only does this thesis examine a medium which is still not very well understood, but it covers an aspect of said medium that is something of a stepchild even among game scholars. The

---

following chapter will delve into the subject in greater detail and provide a more nuanced discussion of what “game narrative” is or can be, in which respects it resembles and in which it differs from narrative in other media, as well as the butterfly effect that results from turning narrative into a cooperative effort.

Among the uninitiated, the idea of games telling stories is liable to raise a few eyebrows. After all, if the success of games like Pong proves anything, it is that players are perfectly content to spend hours batting a pretend ball back and forth across a pretend net with the help of two pretend ping-pong paddles, neither of which resembles the appearance of their real-world counterparts in any great capacity. Entertainment, one would think, cannot get much simpler than this. And besides, a skeptic might be tempted to point out, was it not mentioned just one chapter ago that “story” is a completely extraneous component of games (cf. 2.1.)? What could possibly be so interesting about a mere accessory? More than one might think. For one, even the most basic-seeming videogames are cultural artifacts, invented, programmed and played in specific contexts. On the surface, a game like Spacewar is about two nameless, featureless rocket ships shooting at one another in the great cosmic void. There is no explanation of why they do so, no voice-over or opening text slide to outline the conflict, no “narrative” to speak of (unless, perhaps, one is fond of minimalism and follows the definition of the famous narratologist Gérard Genette, who considers even a simple phrase such as “I walk” or “Pierre has come” a narrative232). Yet, a startling amount of narrative can be gleaned from the context of Spacewar and its creation: Developed in 1962, Spacewar is more than just the result of its programmers’ passion for science fiction.233 It is also a reflection of two issues which dominated the American public consciousness at the time, namely the ideologically charged competition against the Soviet Union in the exploration of outer space, as well as the mounting tensions leading towards the Cuban Missile Crisis in October of the same year.234 The theme, presentation and mechanics of the game take on a deeper meaning when their historical and cultural contexts are taken into consideration. However, it is not necessary to go digging in the depths of history for something that establishes a game narrative in context: The vast majority of modern videogames tell stories in some shape or form, whether they use a story to shape the game experience itself or as a mere framing device to explain the purpose of the game (e.g. Super Mario concocts a scenario in which the main

233 It should be noted that science fiction itself is already a reflection of “the wishes, hopes, fears, inner stresses and tension of an era,” and that science fiction stories (particularly in the 1950s and 1960s) were “frequently read in politicised, allegorical terms.” Judith Buchanan, Shakespeare on Film (London: Pearson Education, 2005) 156.
234 Markoff.
character is on his way to rescue his kidnapped princess in order to lend context to the central game mechanic, which is, in essence, a prolonged obstacle course). This is all fine and good, the skeptic might interject again, but a game about a middle-aged Italian plumber who goes through life jumping on the heads of turtles in order to free the princess of a land of sentient mushroom people hardly sounds like an undiscovered play by Shakespeare. So why bother?

Why bother, indeed. For one, as this chapter has shown, videogames are a new form of mass entertainment with an audience of roughly 155 million people in the US alone. Since the popularity of the new medium does not affect the number of hours in a day or the amount of leisure time the average American has at their disposal, this means that more than a third of Americans now spends less time on the consumption of other media, particularly television and movies. Until now, this increase in game-playing has mainly inspired a slew of investigations into whether their content – whatever it happens to be – is likely to cause harm in some shape or form, either to society (players might become violent or commit crimes) or to the people consuming videogames themselves (players might negatively affect their own body and mind). Yet, little time and attention has been afforded the content itself – its meanings, interpretations, purposes and relation(s) to narrative in other media. The end result of this lack of attention is that Super Mario – a game franchise which celebrated its 30th birthday in 2015 – is still one of the most recognizable examples of videogame storytelling. (Imagine, for the sake of comparison, a parallel universe in which at least half the American population had collectively decided not to pay attention to any film or novel released after circa 1925. Any developments in technique, storytelling, themes, characters, style and expression after this arbitrary cut-off point would be completely unknown to them, along with any knowledge, understanding, criticism, or emotional experience they might inspire. Inhabitants of our own universe would be quick to consider this a tragic development, yet remain unaware of similar gaps in their own understanding of a different medium).

The times when all the entertainment that games provided could be summed up by two virtual paddles and a distinctly square-shaped “ball” (or a plumber trying to rescue his royal would-be love interest) are long past. Due to the breakneck pace of the evolution of computer technology, videogames have changed substantially: As will be covered in detail in the next chapter, they have grown into a visually sophisticated, immensely detailed, and, above all, incredibly labor-intensive form of entertainment which

235 Note for the unfamiliar: This is, in fact, a factually accurate summary of the game.

236 ESA.
tells stories comparable in length to a novel or an entire television series and has serious aspirations to being recognized as a “legitimate” artistic medium (see 4.3.). Mainstream videogames (often referred to as AAA titles\footnote{Pronounced “triple-A”, this moniker denotes the production values (i.e. the production budget, team size, and development time) of a videogame. AAA games are the equivalent of Hollywood blockbuster movies in terms of their scope, cost and (projected) mass appeal.}) consume a budget on par with major Hollywood motion pictures and often take years to make, on account of the complex processes necessary to create an expansive virtual world populated by often hundreds of visually diverse characters, all of whom require their own animations, dialogue and interactions. More importantly, they require a considerable investment of time and effort on the part of the player. A modern videogame can take anywhere between ten and over a hundred hours to beat, discounting the untold hours a player may spend not pursuing the assigned goal(s) or following the story (see 4.1.2.). In fact, most modern videogames deliberately use storytelling to draw the interest and commitment of the player, to provide a context for the mechanics and tasks the player is asked to perform, and to deliver an experience that goes far beyond simply achieving the highest score.

For another, due in large part to the ever-increasing complexity and technological possibilities of videogames (and the resulting possibilities for storytelling), it is no longer possible to approach videogames using the tools of traditional narratology, if indeed it ever was. Although games may look similar to movies in a layperson’s eyes, this similarity is barely skin-deep. Beyond a shared visual aspect, they have very little in common, not just in terms of length or structure, but due to the simple fact that their modes of reception are radically different: While storytelling in most traditional media is, broadly speaking, a one-way street – i.e. the author communicates his or her story and artistic vision to the reader/viewer – in videogames, storytelling is not just a kind of two-way street, but a cooperative effort. The player influences the world of the videogame s/he plays in numerous lesser and more substantial ways, not only by completing the issued challenges the game presents, but by exploring the virtual world, gathering information, playing a role (see 4.4.) and modifying the story being told through their decisions and actions. This cessation of a measure of authority to the player has far-reaching consequences for storytelling in terms of structure, pacing, etc., and cannot possibly be discussed by examining videogames through the lens of another medium. Yet, despite these differences, videogame narratives are ultimately a part of the wealth of stories consumed by Americans every year, and every day of every year, regardless of their medium or genre. They continue to do what stories have been doing since the beginning of time:
They make their audience reflect on them, empathize with them, criticize them, dream about them, modify them, pass them on – and this alone is enough to make them worthy of consideration.
4. Videogames as Narrative Media

“The video game] is a medium that includes still images, moving images, text, audio, three dimensional, navigable space, more of the building blocks of storytelling than any single medium has ever offered us.”

– Janet Murray

The creation of narrative and the practice of storytelling are activities which – much like play and games – have been with humans since time immemorial. No one knows who told the first story, or when, what it was about – hope? faith? love? war? – or why it was told in the first place. Modern cultural anthropologists and cognitive scientists go so far as to argue that humans have a drive, a predisposition towards and even an innate need for storytelling. Jan Assmann, for example, regards narrative capacity as an integral part in the process of memory production and repression. “Narrative memory,” which Assmann defines as language-oriented and coherent, forms a relationship of mutual influence with the visually oriented “scenic memory,” which tends towards incoherence. In The Literary Mind, Mark Turner similarly sees narrative capacity as “the most fundamental instrument of human thought,” but goes further by stating that literary texts are, in essence, external forms of the internal “principles of mind,” namely story, projection and parable, and that humans only become conscious of these principles when literary style draws specific attention to them. Of course, the written word is far from the only means by which to craft a narrative, something which the current wealth of stories flowing forth from the wide variety of media channels makes staggeringly clear. As Roland Barthes states in his “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” narrative comes in a multitude of forms, and can be conveyed through a multitude of media, including – but not limited to – the various forms of oral and written literature (myths, tales, drama, short stories, etc.), pantomime, paintings, stained-glass windows, movies, news reports and ordinary conversation. “Narrative,” Barthes notes, perhaps in an effort to avoid debates on the value of certain narratives over others, “remains largely unconcerned with good or bad literature. Like life itself, it is there,


241 M. Turner v.

international, transhistorical, transcultural." More than simply being there, narrative – and the stories it creates – is incredibly versatile. It can travel between different media, and although it may change its superficial form and the way it is expressed in the process, its core qualities remain unchanged. As Claude Bremond notes:

[Story] is independent of the techniques that bear it along. It may be transposed from one to another medium without losing its essential properties: the subject of a story may serve as argument for a ballet, that of a novel can be transposed to the stage or screen, one cannot recount in words a film to someone who has not seen it. These are words we read, images we see, gestures we decipher, but through them, it is a story we follow; and it could be the same story.

Henry Jenkins highlights a related phenomenon in *Convergence Culture* when he talks about the relatively recent practice of transmedia storytelling: the spread of one story, or a conglomerate of related stories taking place in the same fictional universe, across a number of different media. Rather than an “ur-text” from which several ancillary products spawn, each of the media involved in a transmedia narrative offers up a sliver of the fictional world through its own unique mode(s) of expression. The modern drive to create multimedia entertainment franchises turns the audience into “hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience.”

In short, different media can be used to tell one and the same story in different ways, or to create a story and experience conglomerate.

What does all this have to do with videogames? If stories can be scattered across or transferred at will from one medium to the other without losing anything essential, there seems to be little point in singling out videogames for theirs. After all, *Hamlet* the videogame would still be *Hamlet*, even if a few people might take exception to the fact that Hamlet now has to be prompted to stab Polonius with a press

---

243 Barthes, “Introduction” 337.
245 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 334.
246 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 21.
247 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 3-4.
of the “X” button. Certainly, the central elements of a story – the theme, the plot and even the characters – can be transferred without incident, but the experience of the story, the way it is told, its pacing, even its very structure, is influenced substantially by the medium in which it is told. As Marshall McLuhan’s catch phrase reminds every media scholar, “The medium is the message,” and different kinds of media have different effects on the human mind and perception. To stay with the example of Hamlet, the impassioned soliloquies that draw in the audience during a stage performance would be impossible to directly transfer into a series of paintings. They could be inserted into a videogame without significant technical difficulties (see 4.1.), but it is rather unlikely that they would have the same dramatic effect, or offer the same experience to a player as they would to a theatergoer – and not just because the player cannot wait to finally be allowed to press “X” and stab Polonius. Another example: The story of the 2009 videogame Persona 4 was adapted into the format of an animated television series in 2011, imaginatively entitled Persona 4: The Animation, with interesting side effects. The game, which depicts the slow emergence of mental trauma and the subsequent healing process in its cast of high school-aged characters, spans the course of an entire fictional year, and allows the player to experience nearly every single day in the characters’ lives. In the role of the protagonist, the player influences the day-to-day proceedings by choosing to develop friendships with various characters, and by participating in a number of everyday activities such as cooking, after-school clubs and part-time work. When the same story, with the same characters and the same themes, is condensed into a set of 26 twenty-minute episodes, however, something happens: The careful pacing of the game is thrown into disarray as the characters are forced to confront their inner demons and recover from them in the span of only twenty minutes each in order to adhere to the televised format. Characters go from exchanging their first greetings to having an existential crisis and revealing their deepest hurts to one another in the blink of an eye, whereas the game requires the player to spend real-life hours upon real-life hours (and virtual weeks or months) to gain the trust of a single character. Even more interesting is the fact that the television series attempts to transpose one of the game mechanics which is intended to allow the player to plan his or her activities, namely a calendar/weather forecast system which marks the passage of in-game time and influences which options are available to the player on any given virtual day. The television series tries to utilize the same calendar system to signify flashbacks and flash-forwards within an episode, indicating that sometimes, several days

pass between one scene and the next. However, the same basic system loses its helpful effects here: A mere announcement that several days have passed between one scene and the next is not the same thing as allowing the player to experience those days (virtual though they may be). Clearly, there is something about the medium of the videogame which demands (sometimes considerable) adjustments to the structure of a story, requires special techniques to evoke particular emotions in the players/audience, and which offers vastly different experiences from other media, of which the passage of time is but one peculiarity. Lee Sheldon postulates that games (in general) and stories have much in common, allowing us to learn and grow, to fantasize, to experience feelings and situations we might not otherwise experience: “Each can exist separately from the other, and be consummately entertaining, yet there are also times when the two meet, feed off one another, and grow into something greater than they were separately.”

And in videogames, they have the unique opportunity to come together in entirely new and previously unseen ways. This chapter will address the most crucial hows and whys.

4.1. So Similar, Yet So Different: Approaching Game Narrative

As the previous two chapters have shown, videogames present a series of challenges to researchers, from their elusive core characteristics to their ambiguous status, especially in American society and culture. Game narrative is no exception, as a combination of their unique features, muddled history and the limits of traditional narratology conspire to make it rather difficult to arrive at a solid definition of what game narrative is or what it entails. In fact, until the early to mid-2000s, game narratives were hardly ever studied in detail, or even on their own merits. Until very recently, many media scholars, even those who had embraced and specialized in videogames, approached game narrative by measuring it against older narrative media like novels or films, which they perceived as richer and more complex (and certainly more eminent), in essence comparing apples and digital oranges. At best, games were regarded as a strange narrative “sub-genre” of film: “The videogame uses much of the visual grammar from these media [film and television] in the construction of its worlds, and was able to build upon established conventions (such as conservation of screen direction when cutting from one space to another) through added participatory elements,”

Wolf writes in his 2001 article “Narrative in the Videogame,” confining videogames to a

---

subordinate category that can be analyzed with the same narratological tools as film – the only difference being that they require the occasional press of a button (the aforementioned “participatory elements”) to advance. Especially to a layperson, this assessment seems perfectly conclusive: Both films and videogames are strongly visual media, both unfold on a screen (often even a television set), both are created with the assistance of computers (i.e. especially during the past 20 to 25 years, film has come to rely on digital editing techniques, computer-generated special effects, and full CGI animation films have become a fairly routine occurrence) and even the name, videogame, invites the parallel. Furthermore, the first part of Wolf’s assessment is undeniably accurate: Videogames do borrow from older media, sometimes even extensively, in both their storytelling techniques and the stories they tell – such as the rich world of classic European fantasy and folklore or cult science fiction literature and film – in order to craft their worlds, the aesthetic design of their landscapes and music, their mythologies, monsters and artifacts. Yet, the resemblance between games and film is only skin-deep, as Wolf amends in a later publication together with Bernard Perron: In the introduction to the seminal Video Game Theory Reader (2003), the authors caution against the overemphasis of similarities to other narrative media and place greater emphasis on several unique features of videogames, such as their “navigable, onscreen diegetic space,” the complex relationship between player and player character (“avatars and player-controlled surrogates”), and the ability of certain types of videogames (MMOs) to offer “persistent” digital worlds which provide a mass audience with an experience that is both collective and unique. Clearly, there is much to videogames which causes them to stand out, and stand apart. And most, if not all of these stand-out characteristics pose unique challenges to both videogame narrative and writing about videogame narrative, as will be discussed in the following sections.

4.1.1. Multiple Channels

One of the principal hurdles in the discussion of game narrative is illustrated rather nicely by the quote from the beginning of this chapter. According to Janet Murray, the medium of the videogame “includes still images, moving images, text, audio, three dimensional, navigable space, more of the building blocks of storytelling than any single medium has ever offered us.” Although “building blocks of storytelling” is a

252 Wolf and Perron 11.
253 Murray, “Game-Story” 2.
slight misnomer – rather than blocks of which a story is composed, the listed components can be understood as the means (or channels) through which different aspects of the story can be conveyed – Murray draws attention to one of the core features that makes videogames so interesting, yet so difficult to approach with the traditional tools of narratology. The videogame is a multi-channel medium, comprised of every single method of conveying narrative in existence, and capable of using one, several, or all of these channels at a given time in order to convey a given chunk of narrative. Marie-Laure Ryan illustrates this complexity in the form of a table (see below) which groups different media such as film, literature, painting, etc., according to the number and type of channel(s) they use to transport narrative. Ryan arranges narrative media according to their spatial and temporal extension as well as their sensory channels, primarily comprised of the linguistic, acoustic, static and kinetic visual dimensions.254

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Temporal</th>
<th>Spatial</th>
<th>Spatio-Temporal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One Channel</td>
<td>Two Channels</td>
<td>One Channel</td>
<td>One Channel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>Acoustic</td>
<td>Linguistic/Acoustic</td>
<td>Visual/Static</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media of long-distance oral communication:</td>
<td>Non-texted music</td>
<td>Songs with lyrics, sung poetry</td>
<td>Painting, Sculpture, Photography, Architecture (?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio, Telephone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript writing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printing writing in various supports</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital writing: e-mail, Internet chat, Hypertext (text-only)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Notably, many of the youngest media in this chart – i.e. those invented or popularized roughly within the last century – make use of multiple channels, but only a relatively small number achieve a synthesis of all listed channels: In the table, videogames are grouped with web pages, art CD-ROMs and virtual reality under “interactive computer-mediated forms of expression.”\textsuperscript{255} The more channels a medium makes use of, the more complex the interplay between these channels becomes. In addition, the videogame is far less uniform in the use of its available channels. Most other multi-channel media mentioned in Ryan’s table (e.g. film, comic strips, dramatic performance) achieve a balance between their channels that is more or less consistent across the medium in question. For example, a modern movie narrative is generally understood to be comprised of moving images (visual-kinetic), supported by dialogue, a musical score and other audio effects (linguistic-acoustic). A cinema audience would be very perturbed if the film they paid to see refused to convey narrative through moving images, instead resorting to a string of static images similar to a slide show, or worse, no images at all.\textsuperscript{256} However, due to its relative youth and innate playful aspects, the medium of the videogame invites and encourages experimentation on the part of the designers as well as the players. For instance, the horror game \textit{Papa Sangre} (2010) chooses to forego visuals almost entirely and instead creates a spatial environment solely within the player’s headphones via binaural audio technology. With no visuals to guide them or paint a clear picture of the game world, the player is informed that they are dead and tasked with navigating five demonic palaces in the hope of discovering a way out of the underworld. The only visual cue the game provides is also its interface, namely an icon of a pair of feet which the player must tap (on the touch screen) in order to move. The infernal demons lurking in the palaces are invisible menaces which respond to player-created sounds; should the player move too quickly or step on an (unseen) object in the dark, the monsters give chase. The lack of visuals, as Karen Collins notes in her work on videogame sound and music, is what creates \textit{Papa Sangre}'s oppressive, threatening atmosphere: “\textit{Papa Sangre} is a narrative that can be told only through interactivity. It is moving through the [sound-created] space that makes it scary. […] The separation of sound from source allows mental imagery to dominate the listener’s mind.”\textsuperscript{257} Other games experiment by reducing the linguistic channel, i.e. written text or spoken dialogue, to a bare

\textsuperscript{255} Ryan 21.

\textsuperscript{256} This is not to say that films don’t employ static images in the style of a slide show on occasion (e.g. to simulate the passage of time), but these occurrences are generally very brief and limited to specific occasions.

minimum. *Ico* (2001) and its spiritual successor, *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005), hardly use any dialogue or text to tell their story: In fact, of *Ico*'s initially conceived 115 lines of dialogue, 77 were cut before release — nearly 70 percent of all written/spoken text in the game. Moreover, the characters speak “Runic,” a fictional language which is not subtitled in English (or any other language) and thus cannot be understood by the player; any discussion taking place between the Runic-speakers can only be inferred. *Journey* (2012) takes this reduction to its extreme by featuring no spoken or written text at all (and thus, no linguistic channel). Here, the player is placed in control of a nameless, humanoid figure clad from head to toe in a red cloak, whose sole goal is to reach a massive mountain looming in the distance with a mysterious light shining from its very top. To reach the mountain, the player must traverse desert landscapes, subterranean caverns and the frozen tundra, which are dotted with the remnants of an ancient civilization. The player can begin to guess at the fate of the ancient race and the purpose of the red-cloaked humanoid, who seems to be a lone survivor, by finding hidden wall paintings which tell the story of a flourishing civilization that slowly descended into chaos and ruin. Although the game can be played by one person, it gains an interesting dimension via its online mode, which connects a pair of players at random and allows them to go on the same journey together, supporting each other along the way. Unlike other games with an online mode, *Journey* offers no chat function, and thus no means for the players to exchange words: The only method of communication is achieved by pressing a button, which causes the red-cloaked figures to emit melodious tones that the players can manipulate to create an extremely rudimentary form of musical “conversation.” The wordless, textless *Journey* is kept from becoming a mystifying and unsatisfying experience by its reliance on the monomyth theory developed by Joseph Campbell, who describes it as a “standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero” which follows the formula of a typical rite of passage, “separation – initiation – return.” According to director Jenova Chen, the goal in making *Journey* was to create an emotional exchange between players:

> For *Journey* to create a sense of smallness and a sense of awe will encourage the players to be together and exchange emotions. When you put the two players together online, and put them in a difficult environment, they will create a bond. But just being difficult is not a complete and entertaining experience. So what we did was borrowed the Hero’s Journey, Joseph Campbell’s work, and the three-act structure from filmmaking, the

---


transformation of the character. So you get two players who will go through the
transformation of life together.260

More than simply foregoing dialogue and text, Journey eschews traditional narration entirely. By giving only
the bare minimum of visual cues as to the reason and purpose for seeking out the mountain, the game
allows the players’ knowledge of archetypal stories and their own emotional investment to weave the
narrative for them. In short, although the medium of the videogame has all conceivable narrative channels
at its disposal, creators often mix and match them in order to concoct unique narrative experiences.

Apart from the fact that the videogame is a far less uniform medium than its older and more
established brethren, individual games are rarely even internally consistent in their use of channels. To stay
with the example of film, the audience of a modern movie would probably demand their money back if
the characters suddenly stopped speaking for no discernible reason and reverted to the use of intertitles
and exaggerated pantomime to convey entire portions of the narrative, right before regaining their speech
capacity – again, for no discernible reason. Videogames, however, seemingly possess no such regard for
consistency, and, moreover, their audience usually anticipates and accepts this “channel-hopping” without
befuddlement or complaint. The most intriguing (or confusing) aspect is that channel-hopping does not
by default have any narrative significance. In the event that near or complete silence reigns in a movie
scene (the musical score cuts out and/or the characters stop speaking), this is a deliberate choice on the
part of the director with great narrative significance, used e.g. to emphasize a dramatic revelation or a
shocking scene. If the audio (or parts of the audio, i.e. voiced dialogue) cuts out in a videogame, it usually
signifies little beyond storage or budgetary constraints. Technological limitations have been a constant
companion to videogame creation over the past 50 years; as mentioned in section 2.1., an entire genre –
the text adventure game – was created to circumvent the restrictions of the minuscule storage capacities at
the time (late 1970s-1980s).261 Even though modern computers are far more powerful and game budgets


261 For context, the 1983 IBM personal computer XT came with an internal hard drive of a grand total of 10 MB (megabytes)
and 128 KB (kilobytes) of RAM, a technological revolution at the time. This means that the computer would be unable to display
a single photograph taken with a modern digital camera.
can easily range in the vicinity of $100 million or more,\textsuperscript{262} some constraints still exist. Particularly smaller
studios, which are usually unable to afford extensive motion-capture\textsuperscript{263} or high-resolution graphics in
order to create smooth, detailed, realistic animations of digital characters and objects, often resort to other
techniques in order to save money, such as image slides or art panels in the style of comic books in order
to accompany a written or spoken narrative (e.g. \textit{Infamous}, \textit{Gravity Rush}), or use non-realistic character
models (e.g. sprites) with a low level of detail which convey emotion through exaggerated body language
(e.g. erratic arm-waving to signal excitement), the use of icons (e.g. a bulb lighting up above a character’s
head to signify an idea),\textsuperscript{264} or the supplementation of detailed 2-D character portraits which change subtly
to show the most common facial expressions. Similarly, in many games, not all lines of dialogue are
voiced. Efficient digital audio encoding was not available until the mid-1990s (as mentioned in section
3.3., most game sound was initially produced with the help of simple synthesizer chips),\textsuperscript{265} and audio files
still consume a considerable amount of storage space. For this reason, many developers opt to use voiced
dialogue sparingly, thereby rendering the majority of NPCs, and sometimes even the main characters,
entirely or sporadically mute.

Finally and most importantly, even though some media are comprised of many of the same
narrative channels, they are not used in exactly the same ways. In fact, it is too simplistic to assume that a
medium which borrows certain techniques from another will use said techniques for the same purposes or
to the same effect. For example, bringing back the oft-drawn film/videogame comparison, a modern
movie and a modern videogame both have a soundtrack comprised of a musical score, ambient sound
effects, and voiced dialogue. However, sound in a videogame does not only serve to set a mood, establish
a theme, or try to emulate reality as closely as possible with the help of sound effects like footsteps. Sound

\textsuperscript{262} \textit{Grand Theft Auto V}, one of the most expensive videogames to date, cost roughly $265 million to make and advertise. Cf.
Luke Villapaz, “\textit{GTA 5} Costs $265 Million to Develop and Market, Making It the Most Expensive Video Game Ever Produced:
market-making-it-most-expensive-video-game-ever-produced-report>.

\textsuperscript{263} Motion capture is a technique for digitally recording the movements of people or the motion of objects. Simply put, the
motions of a subject are recorded by affixing reflective markers to key points on their body (usually the joints and areas of major
muscle movement). The more markers are used, the more detailed the data obtained. In videogame design and computer-
animated movie-making, this data is then transposed onto a digital character model in order to animate it in a realistic manner.

\textsuperscript{264} This technique is especially common in games produced in Japan, which have appropriated the visual language of
manga/comic book culture. Relevant emotions and character reactions are indicated or supported by simple visual symbols, e.g. a
cross-shaped mark signifies anger (reminiscent of a throbbing vein), stylized drops signify distress or embarrassment (sweating),
blooming flowers or musical notes indicate delight, etc.

\textsuperscript{265} The very first game to feature extensive voice-acting was \textit{Resident Evil}, released in 1996.
in a videogame is a form of feedback to the player, something which can change and adapt to the player's actions. *Space Invaders* (1978), an early arcade game which is credited with pioneering many of the mechanics which have since become staple features of modern videogames, provides the earliest example of music being used as a form of player feedback (alongside other sound effects). In the game, the player is given control of a single space ship and tasked with fighting off hordes of the titular space invaders, hostile aliens who are intent on eradicating life on Earth. The soundtrack of *Space Invaders* is deceptively simple: A muffled whizzing noise when the player fires the ship's laser weapon, accompanied by a short burst noise when the salvo hits its target. The accompanying music is little more than a rhythm of alternating electronic beeps which speeds up in time with the aliens’ advance, which in turn speeds up as the player defeats more and more enemies. Although sound cannot travel in outer space – a physical reality which the majority of science-fiction films has also always cheerfully ignored – in the game, it fulfills the function of providing the player with feedback on their actions. The music exists to enhance the mood and atmosphere – a slow, threatening pulse to mark the advance of the alien armada that develops into a frantic cacophony when the few remaining ships race across the screen almost too fast for the player to follow, signaling imminent doom. Collins describes videogame sound as deliberately lacking “sonic reality” because it is designed to be interacted with rather than merely listened to.\(^{266}\) Incidentally, this solves the mystery of why videogames go *beep*: Far from being mindless noise pollution, each electronic trill and warble is a signal to the player, informing them of their progress, performance and circumstances (e.g. danger) in the game.

### 4.1.2. Where Game Narrative Begins and Ends

Another idiosyncrasy of game narrative is that it can reach extraordinary lengths, even though there currently exist no precise methods for measuring said length. After all, a videogame has no convenient page count or a limited run time. Short of measuring all the lines of code which make up its digital existence, the length of a videogame is a rough estimate of the amount of time it takes a reasonably skilled player to “beat” the game, i.e. to finish its primary challenges and objectives. This measure does not account for the time an individual player might spend exploring the game world, hunting for secrets and

\(^{266}\) Collins 1-2.
treasure, fulfilling optional objectives (“side quests”), playing mini-games, grinding levels, farming items, or simply dawdling for the sheer pleasure of it. Even so, a videogame – and with it, its narrative – can reach extraordinary lengths: Discounting MMOs, which are designed to be “persistent” worlds (in other words, virtual playgrounds/meeting spaces that never pause or cease to exist, short of the developer taking the servers offline), videogames can take over a hundred hours to complete – again, this time estimate is limited to only the mandatory challenges. Certainly, the sky – or the development budget – is the limit, but even the “shortest” mainstream games typically clock in at between ten and twenty hours of raw playtime. This means that any kind of story being told has to be either so voluminous or so perfectly paced as to fill out at least ten hours without sacrificing the player’s attention and emotional investment. A faint glimpse of the scale and dimensions of a videogame narrative is offered by its script, which contains the entirety of written and spoken text in the game (similar to movie scripts, only larger by several orders of magnitude). For instance, Mass Effect 2 (2010) contains approximately 440,000 words while the 2009 Dragon Age: Origins even reaches around 1,000,000 words, thereby surpassing several famously wordy novels such as War and Peace (~560,000 words) or the Lord of the Rings tetralogy (~550,000 words in total).

Naturally, since the medium is comprised of so many narrative channels, the sum of text in a given game does not equate to its actual narrative; after all, e.g. the above-mentioned Journey is textless, but nevertheless tells a story. Moreover, unlike a novel, not all text in a videogame is written in service to the plot per se, meaning that many lines of dialogue are written for NPCs, sidequests, other optional information (e.g. encyclopedias) which the player may or may not choose to access, or even multiple-choice conversations/divergent story paths (see 4.5.). Nevertheless, the figures for Mass Effect 2 and Dragon Age: Origins highlight how different videogames are from other media to which they are so often compared, in length, volume and structure.

In addition to the massive lengths which videogame narratives can reach, there is the matter of

---

267 A mini-game is a simple, self-contained game within the larger videogame world which serves as optional entertainment. It can range from simple card or dice games to trivia challenges or tests of skill (e.g. racing, puzzle-solving, etc.).

268 Level-grinding refers to the practice of repetitively performing optional tasks (e.g. slaying monsters) in order to obtain enough points (experience) to level up one’s character(s). Players usually engage in grinding to prepare for upcoming challenges or explore the limits of the game mechanics (e.g. maximum level capacity).

269 Farming resembles level-grinding in that players perform repetitive tasks in order to collect particular in-game items or currency for various purposes.

270 Wolf and Perron 11.

“external” or “supplemental” narrative. Few people would consider the blurb on the back of a novel to be part of its narrative, or a DVD booklet to be part of a film’s; they are external, extraneous pieces of information that exist to summarize or advertise the narrative content, but generally have no bearing on the narrative content itself. Until relatively recently, however, these supplemental materials were one of the main repositories of videogame storytelling. In the 1970s and 1980s, an era when every pixel had to be devoted to crafting essential play aspects such as environments and movement, when audio consisted of a handful of discordant electronic warbles and text boxes had stricter limitations on length than a modern-day tweet, providing any kind of sophisticated characterization or story within the game was frequently out of the question. For this reason, such information tended to be included in instruction manuals, on the packaging, or in the form of fan collectibles such as art books and feature articles in magazines. Although the invention of more spacious storage media like CD-ROMs, DVDs and Blu-ray disks, which can store gigabytes of information very easily, has largely alleviated such constraints, circumstances during the production of a game may still force the developer to resort to external media in order to tell the story they wanted to tell. The troubled production history of *Xenogears* (1998), for example, resulted in a severely truncated game supplemented by a 300-page book of cut story content and other information. *Xenogears Perfect Works*, which features detailed descriptions of characters, story events, and production details, serves to explain any plot holes and tie up the loose ends created by the rushed release of the game.272 And then, of course, there is the modern trend towards transmedia storytelling, which can be observed in several long-running game series. *Assassin’s Creed*, released in 2007, has spawned a total of 22 sequels and tie-in games to date, but also entire novels, comic books, as well as several short films, all of which are intended to expand upon or fill in the gaps left by the main games. The games themselves constantly build upon and cross-reference not only events and characters of previous titles, but also information revealed in the novels and comics, thus making it rather difficult to determine where their narrative begins and ends. And finally, there exists the issue of supplementary material being included in the game itself. Many games, long-running franchises in particular, include in-game “encyclopedias” in order to allow the player to peruse information about the setting, characters, or previous titles in the series. This information often exists in the form of a sub-menu within the user interface, but, far from being a simple reference work, it is often used to further extend the fictional universe. For instance, in the fighting game series *Guilty Gear*,

the character profiles, which the player can access in a sub-menu, are revealed to have been compiled by the shadowy organization which is behind many of the villainous schemes in the games. These profiles do more than simply provide information; they extend the narrative of the game itself, since the player now knows that all the characters are under surveillance. Another example is *Final Fantasy XII*, which contains a “Clan Primer,” an assortment of help files, tips and hints, as well as information on the history, geography, flora and fauna of the fictional world of Ivalice, all written in the style of excerpts or leaflets which one might reasonably find in a library book or on a town board announcement in Ivalice itself. In short, it is difficult to draw lines and distinctions when it comes to what is and is not part of a game’s narrative. Even if one decides to approach the issue on a case-by-case basis, deciding that a dry, bare-bones “how to play” instruction manual should be ruled out as part of the game narrative while a lore-rich, stylistically consistent and story-relevant collection of information ought to be ruled in, this does not automatically constitute a solution, as will become clear in the next point.

4.1.3. Interactivity and Mechanics

Another important difference from traditional media is that videogame narratives are interactive experiences. While it can be argued that all narratives are technically “interactive” – for example, a reader interacts with the novel he or she is reading by turning the pages and engaging with the story through the act of reading, i.e. comprehending the words, imagining the scenes, becoming emotionally invested – the interactivity offered by games runs far deeper, and in different directions. As Eric Zimmerman points out, videogame interactivity is “explicit interactivity; or participation with designed choices and procedures”273 which have been programmed into the game. This special kind of interactivity has a range of implications for narrative and storytelling, which will be discussed in subsequent points. One immediate consequence is that the player, as an active participant who exerts influence on the way the game unfolds, needs to have means at their disposal to plan and execute particular actions, and receive feedback on these actions. This basic requirement throws one of the most useful distinctions for the analysis of visual media (primarily film) into disarray, namely the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic elements. Although some game scholars use this terminology to describe videogames (Wolf and Perron, for example, refer to their

---

“navigable, on-screen diegetic space”

and unreliable. Simply put, film scholars use the pair of terms to denote whether or not a particular narrative element is a part of the fictional world depicted in a movie: For instance, a roadside sign that reads, “Welcome to Santa Barbara,” is diegetic, i.e. part of the film story that takes place – obviously – in Santa Barbara. If the convenient road sign is replaced with a subtitle that reads “Santa Barbara, California,” the information becomes non-diegetic. The information itself remains basically the same – in either case, the viewer can rest assured that the characters are, indeed, in Santa Barbara, but in the case of the subtitle, it is information that is external to the fictional world. Similarly, a piece of music can be either diegetic, e.g. when a band is playing in a scene, a character is shown listening to the radio, etc., or non-diegetic, as is the case with any music in the film that does not originate from within its fictional world.

In a videogame, however, it can become quite difficult to tell which parts belong to the fictional world and which do not, a problem that is most obvious with elements and systems intended to allow the player to interact with the game in an efficient manner. These elements are subsumed under two unwieldy acronyms, the UI (user interface) and the HUD (heads-up display). The user interface, a familiar term from the realms of computer programming and the operation of complex machinery, refers to the mechanics which relay relevant information to the player, providing them with feedback and allowing them to interact with the game world in various ways. Its most common form is the HUD, so named for its similarity to airplane heads-up displays, which consists of “persistent onscreen elements” intended to convey said information to the player, usually in the form of simple visual indicators like progress or status bars, rankings, or numerical values. HUDs come in many shapes and sizes, some small and unobtrusive, others especially attention-grabbing, e.g. when the player is in danger of losing. For example, racing videogames will display the ranking of the player and AI participants, which constantly changes as the racers overtake one another, fall behind, or are eliminated from the competition due to a crash. Most videogames involving physical combat use so-called health bars or HP (hit points) to show the player how much damage has been dealt to their character(s), and how much damage the player has dealt to enemies

274 Wolf and Perron 11.


276 The AI (artificial intelligence) refers to algorithms which are used to simulate intelligent behavior in non-player characters. Depending on the complexity of the algorithms, NPCs may be capable of adapting to player behavior and adjusting their responses accordingly.
in return. Still other forms and functions of HUDs include navigational aids (e.g. maps, a compass or a coordinate system), an overview of items or skills which the player can use to explore the virtual world, as well as timers and mission objectives.

In some games, these values persistently float above the characters’ heads or in a corner of the screen, delivering a constant stream of information to the player upon which they can base their planning and decisions. Since one can reasonably assume that the inhabitants of the fictional world in the game are not truly going about their virtual lives with icons and gauges swirling around their heads, these elements must be non-diegetic. However, videogames are nothing if not inventive, and have found many ways to blend the HUD with the fictional world of the game by disguising it as a feature or item which the player character would reasonably have at his or her disposal, like a pocket computer or certain supernatural abilities (e.g. x-ray vision). For example, in the science-fiction trilogy Metroid Prime (2002-2007), the space-faring bounty hunter Samus Aran is clad from head to toe in an armor-plated cybernetic space suit. Since the player shares Samus’s field of vision, the HUD (comprised of hit point and targeting indicators, maps and compass, etc.) becomes a convenient feature of Samus’s advanced suit, with all relevant information being projected as holograms onto the visor of her helmet. In order to emphasize this integration, the player is even able to see a faint reflection of parts of Samus’s face in the visor during certain lighting conditions.277 In Assassin’s Creed, a game set, for the most part, in the 12th-century Middle East, practically all visible HUD elements are explained by the nesting-doll structure of the story: Although the main story revolves around the medieval assassin Altair, the framing story takes place in the 21st century, when Desmond Miles, a distant descendant of Altair, has to make use of a futuristic machine to relive his ancestor’s memories in order to uncover the location of a powerful ancient artifact. Any HUD indicators the player sees, such as HP gauges, maps, action icons or mission objectives, are actually part of the functions of said fantastical machine.278 Other games at least nominally try to explain away their HUD, e.g. by describing inventory menus as “bags” or “backpacks” and even allowing the player to find or purchase bigger storage containers within the game world. Xenosaga Episode I even attempts to explain the fact that the characters are not carrying visible tools or backpacks by introducing a convoluted, science-fictional phenomenon which allows the characters to instantly materialize any item they possess from a type of

277 Metroid Prime, dev. Nintendo, and Retro Studios (Gamecube: Nintendo, 2002).
278 Assassin’s Creed, dev. Ubisoft Montréal (PlayStation 3: Ubisoft, 2007).
inter-dimensional “pocket.”\textsuperscript{279}

A similar conundrum arises whenever a game introduces help features like tutorials, story synopses or in-game dictionaries that explain game-specific vocabulary. Although there are plenty of games which provide guidance in the form of simple text boxes which display the relevant information, just as many make efforts to disguise or integrate said features. For example, *Kingdom Hearts* gives the player a tutorial of its most basic functions by framing it as a mystical trial which the player must pass in order to be deemed “worthy.” *Xenosaga Episode I* frames its entire combat and exploration tutorial as a start-up test for one of its protagonists, a very sophisticated robot. At the beginning of *Gears of War*, the main characters are already seasoned soldiers and explorers, which is why the tutorial takes the form of them instructing a rookie soldier in the basics of combat. Story synopses and dictionaries are often framed as mnemonic devices for the characters. For example, in *Tales of the Abyss*, the main character Luke is afflicted with a peculiar type of memory loss, which prompts him to keep a diary of his day-to-day life. This diary doubles as a dictionary/summary for the player, since it recapitulates story events from the game and explains particular terminology – albeit in Luke’s voice and described from his perspective.\textsuperscript{280} It allows the player to gain a deeper understanding of Luke’s personality and motivations while serving a strategic purpose at the same time. Yet, the player can only access this diary as a series of text files located in a sub-menu of the wider user interface. The interface itself is not part of the fictional world of *Tales of the Abyss*, but Luke’s diary is implied to exist in the game world in a different (albeit unseen) form. The *Uncharted* series integrates its guidance systems even further by offering help to the player in the form of the main character’s notebook. Similar to Luke’s diary in *Tales of the Abyss*, the notebook is an inconspicuous item whose presence is explained by Nathan Drake’s occupation of treasure hunter and part-time hobby archaeologist – it just so happens to double as a collection of tips and hints to the player. Unlike Luke’s diary, however, *Uncharted*’s help feature is aesthetically and functionally identical with an actual notebook: Its appearance is that of a small pocketbook whose pages are smudged and dog-eared, filled with Drake’s sketches of his (and the player’s) discoveries, haphazardly pasted snapshots and other small mementos, and Drake’s cheeky comments and observations in the margins.\textsuperscript{281} The game leaves absolutely no doubt that Drake’s journal truly exists for the character to use: Whenever the player inputs

\textsuperscript{279} *Xenosaga Episode I: Der Wille zur Macht*, dev. Monolith Soft (PlayStation 2: Namco, 2003).

\textsuperscript{280} *Tales of the Abyss*, dev. Namco Tales Studio (PlayStation 2: Namco Bandai Games, 2006).

\textsuperscript{281} *Uncharted: Drake’s Fortune*, dev. Naughty Dog (PlayStation 3: Sony Computer Entertainment, 2007).
the prompt to access it, a brief animation shows Drake pulling the journal from his pocket and flipping it open. In short, Drake’s journal is simultaneously a UI feature which aids the player and a part of the fictional setting. Another related in-between element is the so-called dialogue trees, which allow players to access various responses from a short list of options in order to influence the outcome of a conversation or scenario (thus creating short- or long-lived narrative “branches”). These also fall into the category of “pseudo-diegetic” elements. On the one hand, they are simply prompts for the player to choose or reject; on the other hand, they can be interpreted as and are often phrased like thoughts passing through the player character’s mind. The fact that the player is privy to these thoughts via the user interface and can even influence their direction can be seen as equivalent to the character coming to a decision in the game world.

In each case, the lines between diegetic and non-diegetic elements blur to the point where it is nearly impossible to make clear, generalized distinctions. At the very least, the notion of diegesis differs substantially from its original use in film studies, like, for example, in the case of Luke’s diary, which would have to be classified as a diegetic element (its contents exist in some shape or form in the fictional world) embedded in a non-diegetic element (the non-integrated HUD). At this point, the terminology borrowed from film becomes stretched like a rubber band as it is used to describe characteristics and idiosyncrasies which are simply not a concern in its medium of origin. In summary, it can be said that the application of terminology and concepts from other narrative media must be done with caution, if it is not avoided altogether. Although the videogame borrows from other media and may look similar to one or the other on a surface level, it is not “just” a movie where one occasionally presses a button, any more than a movie is “just” a novel with moving pictures. The idiosyncrasies of the videogame are a part of what makes it so interesting as a vehicle for telling stories, even if – as will be covered below – it may seem like game and story do not see eye to eye.

4.2. Irreconcilable Differences? Perspectives on Games Telling Stories

An odd aspect in writing about game narrative is that nobody quite seems to know what to make of it. Laypersons often view videogames as merchandising by-products riding high on the success of a recent summer blockbuster or popular television series – a perspective that is supported by the emergence of transmedia entertainment franchises – but not as a medium capable of producing original stories. “If [the
videogame] is a form of fiction, then it is still perceived as a form of fiction for children and adolescents, with all the pejorative associations that such a classification carries with it. [...] ‘Adult,’ when it is invoked as a term at all, most often equates with ‘pornographic,’ rather than ‘sophisticated,’” Atkins opined in 2003, and his words still ring true more than a decade later. Even more curiously, some game designers and journalists seem to share this perception, given that game stories are often praised in the press for being “cinematic,” leading some to voice the hope that the “Citizen Kane of gaming” may be discovered one day. What is attractive about the idea of a “Citizen Kane of gaming” is the idea of legitimacy, the level of public acceptance and even admiration which film receives in the art world and in (American) society at large. However, much like a younger sibling emulating an older one in order to receive more praise from eagle-eyed aunts and uncles at a family reunion, this trend runs the risk of obscuring what makes the medium and its stories unique. And, much like the borrowed suit or dress into which the younger sibling tries to fit their gangly limbs, the label of “cinematic” is ill-fitting for a medium whose narratives, as has been demonstrated above, only bear cursory similarities to those of film.

Even stranger than that, however, is the status of game narrative in scholarly circles. Game narrative enjoys a dubious reputation even among game researchers since, as mentioned in 2.1., “story” is an optional component. A game, as Juul argues, is first and foremost a system of rules with variable outcomes. Added to this is the fact that the tools of traditional narratology are not particularly suited to the study of games. Given these shortcomings, approaches to applying traditional narratology to games have been met with considerable resistance from scholars of ludology, who argue for a study of games on their own terms and the examination of the systems of rules that govern them instead of a focus on optional elements like narrative. After all, there are plenty of games, particularly those created before the advent of sophisticated storage, that do not bother with narrative elements, and many non-virtual games such as chess, poker or tennis have been successfully transferred to the computer screen without the need for a narrative to engage their players. Espen Aarseth, who argues for a view of games as simulations

284 Juul 36.
instead of textual artifacts, states that games present a “radically different alternative to narratives as
cognitive and communicative systems,” since the static nature of narrative is directly oppositional to the
flexibility of games. Instead of textual artifacts, games present a “radically different alternative to narratives as
cognitive and communicative systems,” since the static nature of narrative is directly oppositional to the
flexibility of games.285 Games, so Aarseth, cannot be read like texts, they have to be played.286 This builds
on Aarseth’s earlier work regarding the new forms of texts and the new ways of reading texts that came
about, or at least became prominent, with the advent of computer technology and the growing influence
of the Internet on the shape, structure and possibilities of literature. Using “cybertext” as an umbrella
term for the broad swath of textual phenomena ranging from hypertext fiction to adventure games,
Aarseth describes these forms as “ergodic,” a concept which he sees as the principal difference to
traditional literature and narratology. The reader’s work effort, their strong involvement in navigating and
piecing the text together instead of comfortably turning the pages, is the key.287 The basis of this analysis is
reflected in the argument that games must be played – according to ludologists, the effort it takes, and
thus the rules that shape this effort, should be the focus of the inquiry.

An unintended side effect of the desire to focus on the uniqueness of videogames as games,
however, is that “story” has grown to be framed as an intrusive force at odds with the “game” nature of
the medium videogame. In this adversarial relationship, “story” is a restrictive element, signifying linearity,
structure and prescriptiveness, while “game” signifies freedom, interactivity and non-linearity.288 Hence,
some scholars view the presence of “story” as obstruction to the natural flow of “game,” a rigid corset
which severely limits its creativity and spontaneity, resulting in dull, uniform, un-creative videogames and
unfulfilling play experiences. For example, ludologist Markku Eskelinen has repeatedly expressed his
stance against the view of games as narrative media comparable to film and literature. In his 2001 essay,
“The Gaming Situation,” Eskelinen concludes that “stories are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-
wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of marketing tools is just a waste of
time and energy. It’s no wonder gaming mechanisms are suffering from slow or even lethargic states of

286 Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies.”
development, as they are constantly and intentionally confused with narrative or dramatic or cinematic mechanisms.  

4.2.1. When “Game” and “Story” Collide

What can a researcher interested in game narratives say in the face of such scathing critique? They can, first of all, concede that Eskelinen has a point: Traditional forms of narrative are – with a few small exceptions (e.g. choose-your-own-adventure books, round-robin storytelling) – largely non-interactive, relegating the audience to the role of a more-or-less passive recipient rather than an active participant in their creation. Traditional narrative tools and techniques reflect this non-interactivity: A conventional novel does not ask the reader for input on how they would like the story to proceed, nor does it mercilessly glue shut its own pages and deny the reader access to the rest of the novel when they fail to be sufficiently fast or skilled at reading. Likewise, a movie does not give the viewer control of the camera, allowing them to swing it around in a 360° circle to take a good look at every nook and cranny of a given setting. Instead, the movie is shot and edited in such a way as to allow the viewer to follow along. If these same conventional, non-interactive techniques are employed to tell a story in a videogame, it comes as no surprise that the resulting experience is less than pleasant for a player who expects to be a participant rather than a recipient.

One example of such a non-interactive technique is the cut-scene, a “cinematic sequence that suspends regular gameplay in order to convey plot, characterization, and spectacle.” Its name derives from its role in the game: As Rune Klevjer explains, it “cuts” away from the player-controlled game to show a pre-arranged “scene,” and has been employed with increasing frequency since its introduction in Pac-Man in 1980, which featured three short, humorous non-interactive intermissions of Pac-Man and his ghostly nemesis chasing each other around in front of a black background. In fact, the titles of the Pac-Man series, although they are straightforward maze-navigation games at their core, are a perfect illustration of the evolution of the cut-scene. In the 1982 sequel Ms. Pac-Man, which introduced a female Pac-Man character (paradoxically not named Pac-Woman), the humorous intermissions become the stages of a love  

story: Preceded by a little icon of a movie slate and a short scene title, the intermissions show Pac-Man and Ms. Pac-Man running into each other while being chased by ghosts (entitled “Act 1: They Meet”), chasing each other in a parody of romantic pursuit (“Act 2: The Chase”), and finally having a baby delivered by a pixilated stork (“Act 3: Junior”). In the 1983 Jr. Pac-Man, these intermissions become fairly involved segments of a largely wordless story: Gone are the simple black backgrounds, as Pac-Man Jr. is shown living in a house with a picket-fence yard, where he meets the child of one of his parents’ ghostly enemies, who is subsequently chased away by Ms. Pac-Man in an effort to protect her son (“Jr. Meets Yum-Yum”). In “The Gift,” Pac-Man Jr. meets the child ghost Yum-Yum in the park, handing her a red balloon as a gift while Yum-Yum’s father watches from the bushes, presumably less than enthused. In the final scene, the father’s ambush is thwarted by the reappearance of Ms. Pac-Man, and the two children run away to play together, hearts dancing in a circle around them (“They Escape!”). With the advent of more spacious storage devices like the CD-ROM and 3-D graphics technology, narrative cut-scenes steadily grew in frequency, length and opulence, functioning as ways for the developers to express their artistic vision and amaze the audience, and becoming stylistic hallmarks of certain game series like Final Fantasy and Metal Gear Solid.

However, this increase in the length and frequency of the cut-scene has the consequence of shifting large portions of game narrative into the realm of non-interactivity, and can easily work to the detriment of the game as a whole and the enjoyment of the players. Games like Star Ocean: The Last Hope, Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots, the Xenosaga series or Final Fantasy XIII, which interrupt their gameplay with frequent, overly long non-interactive sequences (lasting upwards of twenty minutes), have garnered extensive criticism for their lack of involvement and focus as their players are reduced to passive viewers who only occasionally have to shake their controllers to prevent them from shutting down in order to preserve battery power. Experiments like Heavy Rain (2010) or Beyond: Two Souls (2013), two games that closely resemble interactive movies, have fiercely divided their audience. Briefly touching on interactive films in her article on emergent authorship, Celia Pearce writes:

Both in the desktop environment (CDROMs such as Johnny Mnemonic), on the set-top

---

295 The ending of Metal Gear Solid IV: Guns of the Patriots (2008) strings several cut-scenes together, resulting in a 72-minute long non-interactive sequence.
(CDI titles *Burn Cycle* and *Voyeur*) and even in movie theaters (Interfilm’s *I’m Your Man* and *Mr. Payback*), the so-called interactive movie seemed to lack the strengths of both movies – script, quality acting, directing – and games – fun, challenge – leaving us with a singularly unsatisfying experience that never fulfilled its promise. The interactive novel has also yielded disappointing results. With the exception of a few isolated works that have met high critical acclaim from a notably small audience, the interactive novel has not thus far emerged as a robust fictional form.²⁹⁶

In the case of videogames, the disapproval is due to the expectations which surround the medium; the film audience is generally confined to their seats, reacting to events which they cannot actively and immediately influence, whereas videogame players are intensely and directly involved – making split-second decisions, inventing strategies, weighing moral pros and cons, and advancing through the game by the sheer force of their curiosity and the thrill of future challenges. If this involvement is suddenly stripped away or reduced to a bare minimum for an extended period of time, players will begin to wonder at their purpose. After all, if they are not allowed to participate in a participatory medium, then why does the game need them?²⁹⁷ In short, the cut-scene is a tool which separates “story” from “game” as much as possible and runs the risk of creating a tug-of-war between the non-interactive (now equated to storytelling in general) and the interactive (now equated to gameplay in general).

However, there are other instances where “story” and “game” seem to clash. Sometimes the mechanics of a game conflict with the needs of storytelling; for example, many games feature a means for the player-controlled character(s) to regain lost health (hit points), either via magic spells, mystical objects or potions, first-aid kits, futuristic forms of curative medicine, or some form of unexplained innate regenerative capabilities which allow them to recover from fatal stab wounds and bullet holes in less than a minute, provided the player manages to seek cover behind a conveniently placed little wall. Yet, when the dramatic needs of the plot demand that a character must be severely wounded or even die, all of these mechanisms might as well not exist in the first place. In *Final Fantasy V*, the characters desperately attempt to treat their fallen comrade Galuf by using every tried-and-true method in their arsenal, ranging from

²⁹⁷ Some developers have attempted to fix the problem of long cut-scenes by giving players the option of skipping them with the press of a button. This “remedy” creates a rather absurd situation: Not only does the developer anticipate that the cut-scene will test the limits of the player’s patience, but the player, should they choose to skip, is deprived of considerable portions of the story, which results in a lack of context for all subsequent play situations. (It should be noted that the “skip cut-scene” feature is mostly intended for repeated playthroughs, when the player is already familiar with the story, but it still begs the question of why the cut-scene was used in the first place).
powerful healing spells to revival medicines, yet Galuf’s fate is sealed. In *Final Fantasy VII*, the characters do not even attempt to heal or revive the fatally wounded Aeris; instead, it is understood that she is beyond help, so all the player can do is accept her loss. In other instances, a cut-scene depicts a tragic or somber event, yet, once it ends, the game welcomes the player back to the action with the same jaunty, upbeat music that was playing before the tiny virtual peasant village was obliterated by the cruel hand of fate. At other times it seems to be the game mechanics which do not fit the story being told: In *Assassin’s Creed*, a central story point is the titular “creed” of the medieval assassin syndicate which demands of all its members to “stay [their] blade from the flesh of an innocent.” The player can still accidentally or deliberately inflict random violence upon the innocent citizens wandering the virtual streets of Jerusalem, Acre and Damascus, but the game will punish these actions by deducting health from the player character Altair and by alerting the city guards. Should the player not heed these warnings, they are eventually confronted by the “game over” screen. Oddly enough, the same “amnesty” is not extended to the city guards who try to stop Altair from spying on or coming after their corrupt, unscrupulous overlords. The game marks the guards as “enemies” no matter the situation, allowing the player to freely dispatch them at their own discretion. This creates two curious issues: One, it calls into question how the game defines the term “innocent,” which only seems to apply to allied and non-combatant characters (after all, it stands to reason that the hundreds of city guards probably have little to no idea of their employers’ misdeeds and are simply doing their jobs). Two, it creates tension between the game mechanics, which allow the player to harm or kill any character who has been designated as an enemy, and the ideal of the noble-minded vigilante assassin propagated by the narrative.

What all these (and other) examples suggest is that there apparently exists a fundamental opposition between “story” and “gameplay,” which confirms Eskelinen’s assessment of game narratives as curtailers of play mechanics, creative aspects and interactive freedom. However, this observation relies on
two fundamental assumptions. The first assumption is that it is perfectly clear and obvious what is meant by “story” and what is meant by “game.” After all, if one interferes with the other, there must be some kind of demarcation, some kind of line which allows an observer to categorize all components of a given videogame as belonging to either one or the other. The second assumption, building upon the first, is that the whole – the videogame which happens to tell a story – is only the sum of its parts: It suggests that if one were to find the seams where the game designers have so rudely grafted a “story” onto the “game” and pulled the two apart, one would be left with a “pure game” and a “pure story,” two clean halves which are perfectly fine (and easier to study) when they are separated, but which, when brought together, result in a type of Frankenstein’s monster. Fortunately, as has been shown time and again, where videogames are concerned, things are rarely quite so simple.

4.2.2. Particle Physics: Challenge and Context

In quantum mechanics, there exists a neat little conundrum: Every fundamental particle exhibits the behavior and properties of not only a particle, but also a wave. A slightly similar problem can be said to exist with regard to “story” and “game” in videogame research: Whether a given component of a given videogame qualifies as a “game” part or a “story” part is often far from obvious. In fact, depending on the perspective, the component can be both or either, which renders the distinction ineffective at best. This issue becomes especially noticeable in minimalist games which forego many established conventions of narrative and videogame design. Shadow of the Colossus (2006) uses very little dialogue and exposition to tell its story, and very few mechanics for the player to master. The game is set in a vast, isolated land, dotted with the ruins of majestic buildings but otherwise devoid of human life. The protagonist (player character) journeys to this land on horseback, bringing with him the lifeless body of a young woman, whom he hopes to revive using the power of an ancient god sealed somewhere within this land. In order to be granted the god’s blessing, the protagonist is tasked with slaying sixteen gigantic beasts that roam the countryside – the titular colossi. The mechanics of doing so are deceptively simple: The protagonist must use the light from a holy sword to divine the location of each monster, travel there, and find some method of scaling its humongous body to locate a weak spot and slay the creature. The player/protagonist essentially spends vast swaths of the game traveling, taking in the lonely beauty of this forbidden world, traversing silent forests, windswept plains and desert dunes with no one but a horse for company. The
boss monsters the player is told to slay – the sixteen colossi – do not behave like typical videogame enemies: They are more reminiscent of chunks of the landscape come to life, lumbering, moss-covered giants that often do not even actively pursue or hurt the player/protagonist until the player/protagonist begins attacking their weak point. The thrill and challenge of the battles comes in large part from scrambling up these enormous bodies with two feeble human hands (one of which has to hold onto the sword), and clinging like an ant to the shivering tassels of fur on the back or legs of a creature fifty stories high, desperately waiting for it to stop bucking and shaking before the protagonist runs out of strength and falls to his doom. How can one divide up *Shadow of the Colossus* according to the gameplay/story dichotomy? Is the journey to find the colossi, with all the atmospheric splendor of the landscape and the remnants of a lost civilization, part of the story or the gameplay? What about the scaling and slaying of the colossi? Is the fact that the player/protagonist can choose pet and praise the horse for its steadfast loyalty and service purely a gameplay mechanic, or does it possess narrative meaning? What about the fact that there is a horse in the first place? It is at best difficult, and at worst impossible, to find the seams that will unravel *Shadow of the Colossus* into a “game” and a “story.” The same experiment can be repeated on a far more general level as well. For example, is the soundtrack of a videogame, its musical score and sound effects, part of the gameplay or the story? As mentioned in 4.1., videogame music and other sounds are not just ambient distractions: They provide feedback, orientation and contribute to a sense of spatiality, among other things. Yet they also create an atmosphere, evoke emotions, support characterization, provide cultural and historical references, and so on and so forth. What about the visuals, the artistic renditions of the characters and the virtual world itself? Unless one reduces game mechanics to completely abstract rules, “story” has often played an intensely creative and enriching part in the creation of game mechanics, and/or serves as a logical explanation of them. *Final Fantasy VII*, for instance, introduces the “materia” system which allows the player to customize the playable characters, giving them unique strengths and abilities. The materia are small, colorful orbs which can be placed in special slots on the characters’ weapons and armor, allowing the player to experiment freely and discover strategically advantageous combinations for any given situation. However, the materia system is not simply a strategic mechanic; it is given context by the story of *Final Fantasy VII*, according to which these small orbs are containers of immense magical power whose exploitation is a major source of conflict in the fictional

---

303 *Shadow of the Colossus*, dev. SCE Japan Studio (PlayStation 2: Sony Computer Entertainment, 2005).
world of the game. Although every game can be reduced to its bare essentials (rules and goals), the specifics and peculiarities of these rules and goals are often highly context-sensitive, meaning that they are influenced by the story the game is trying to tell. The same is true in reverse: Narrative adapts and changes in order to accommodate gameplay in ways which are simply not a matter of concern in traditional narrative media like literature or film. As an interactive medium, the videogame requires the input of its audience, the player(s), in order to unfold. Gameplay and story, or, as it might be better expressed, challenge and context, play off and with one another in countless smaller and bigger ways, and have contributed significantly to the current incredible variety of videogames.

Given that gameplay and story work together to form intricate and unique games which offer equally unique play experiences, the idea of “game” and “story” as adversarial forces bears revisiting. Strangely enough, although “game” is defined as freedom, the very essence of games is rules and objectives. And what are rules if not restrictions, a voluntary cessation of freedom for the sake of the challenge? And what does a goal imply, if not a kind of linearity, a beginning and an end, sometimes even a middle (half-time during various sports, mid-bosses in videogames)? Some of the most beloved classics in videogame history (e.g. Pac-Man, Space Invaders) which include hardly any story at all are also among the most rigidly linear. Their linearity stems from their steadily increasing difficulty: For example, in Space Invaders, players work towards the goal of repealing an alien invasion, which becomes harder and harder to achieve the further the player progresses. The more alien ships the player eliminates, the faster the remaining fleet advances on Earth, making them ever more difficult to hit.304 If narrative supposedly restricts the player, then so does gameplay; if a story is linear, then so, on a very basic level, is every game with an objective or goal, whether that is achieving the highest score, unlocking the last level, or defeating the final boss. In fact, Janet Murray proposes that games and stories have far more in common and are far more compatible than is generally assumed. In “From Game-Story to Cyber-Drama,” Murray argues that both “game” and “story” possess two central features which make them particularly suited to each other. The first feature is the contest, which Murray describes as integral to the human experience: While games

---

304 Incidentally, Space Invaders was the first videogame to employ this steadily rising difficulty curve, a feature which is now a staple of the vast majority of modern games. Its discovery, however, was entirely accidental. Too complex for the computers of 1979, Space Invaders would slow down to a crawl when swarms of enemies crowded the screen, and would speed up when the pixelated invaders were eliminated one by one. Instead of correcting this problem, Tomohiro Nishikado, the creator of Space Invaders, decided to transform it into a cornerstone of the gameplay. “Nishikado-san Speaks,” Retro Gamer 3 (May 2004): 35.
“enact” this core experience in the form of challenges, stories dramatize and narrate it.\textsuperscript{305} The second feature is the puzzle: In a story, the audience has to piece together what is happening, something that is most evident in mystery novels, which, as Murray notes, is often evaluated like a game between the writer and the reader (i.e. how challenging or fair the puzzle is).\textsuperscript{306} Greg Costikyan also points out that, while a story might be constrained by its own structure and linearity, a game is also “a system of constraints” (rules), and that “if we want a story to emerge from a game we must constrain it [the game] in such a way that it does.”\textsuperscript{307} Given this, it might be better to say that the methods of combining game and story may at times lead to dissonance, rather than the story itself. The challenge lies in finding a working combination of freedom and constraint in order to provide a satisfying play experience (see 4.5.).

Yet, which methods lead to a successful melding and which lead to imbalance and disturbance depends on an entire host of variable factors, such as game genre, length, structure, pacing, audience demographics, and others. Even the much maligned non-interactive elements like the above-mentioned cut-scene can and do fulfill a variety of purposes. For one, they may function as a type of reward for the player, particularly if they are presented in a visual style that distinctly differs from the rest of the game aesthetics, for example hand-drawn animation, CGI full-motion video, or stylized still images. \textit{Okami} (2006), a game based on the myths of Japanese folklore, features artwork in the style of \textit{ukiyo-e} (Japanese woodblock printing) to illustrate key scenes, usually after the player has won a fierce struggle or completed a difficult quest. Similarly, the \textit{Civilization} series uses a mixture of CG animation and video clips to accompany various developmental milestones or the completion of secret projects in the player’s faction, usually accompanied by excerpts of poetry or philosophical treatises. These cut-scenes, too, interrupt the gameplay, yet serve the function of a visual reward and contribute to the player’s sense of achievement. Moreover, the cut-scene can serve as a tool for pacing. Depending on the type of game and its narrative, well-placed and –timed cut-scenes can function as structuring elements which interrupt what would otherwise be a relentless (and ultimately wearying) flood of action, periodically granting the player a brief respite to reflect on their experiences and progress thus far. Rune Klevjer argues along these lines in his article “In Defence of Cutscenes” by stating that players will quickly structure their play behavior and

\textsuperscript{305} Murray, “Game-Story” 2.

\textsuperscript{306} Murray, “Game-Story” 2.

habits around such non-

interactive interludes if these are kept short and introduced with a certain
regularity. Furthermore, cut-scenes may serve as a way to guide the player's focus and establish a mood
or key theme to an effect that is startlingly different from player-controlled discovery. An interesting
comparison can be made between *Final Fantasy X* and *Lost Odyssey*, two games with central themes of
departure, death and the afterlife. Both games feature a funeral rite as a pivotal point in the journey of
their characters, yet the framings of the funeral rites differ vastly. In *Final Fantasy X*, the funeral is
introduced in a brief CGI cut-scene: The player arrives at the dock of a destroyed fishing village to watch
Yuna, the female protagonist, prepare to send the souls of the recently deceased to the afterlife. She steps
off the dock, her feet barely touching the surface of the water as the camera pans below the waves to
show rows of submerged coffins, adorned with flowers. At the center of the ring of coffins, Yuna begins a
slow-moving dance as a haunting song plays, the water rising in time with her careful but pained
movements as the ritual draws the souls of the dead from the coffins and guides them towards eternal
rest. In *Lost Odyssey*, the funeral rite has to be set up and conducted by the player in the role of the
young boy Mack, who is charged with severing the ribbons tying his mother's coffin canoe to the shore in
a symbolic act of letting go. By pressing buttons, the player performs the necessary rite of lighting the
torches in order to burn away the ribbons, allowing the coffin to glide into the sea. Though the segments
possess a similar theme – death and departure – the atmosphere generated by their mode of presentation
diffs fundamentally. *Final Fantasy X* focuses on the meaning and impact of the rite, and the player's lack
of control in the scene reflects Yuna's role as a religious sacrifice in the story, which does not permit her
to lead a self-determined life. The player accompanies her on this journey towards the inevitable without
any sway over her decision to give her life for the sake of others. In *Lost Odyssey*, the player is actively
involved in the process of letting go of the deceased mother, experiencing it from the perspective of her
young son. The faith practiced by the characters explicitly demands that it be the bereaved who initiate the
process of letting go: “These ribbons are the only thing that tie us, the living, to Miss Lirum, the deceased.
Miss Lirum must now begin her new journey. Our final duty is to sever our ties with her in the form of
these ribbons.” It is doubtful that either segment would have achieved the same impact if their modes

---

309 *Final Fantasy X*.
310 *Lost Odyssey*, dev. Mistwalker, and Feelplus (Xbox360: Microsoft Game Studios, 2008).
of presentation had been reversed. Another example that demonstrates the amount of care required for taking control away from the player in favor of a cut-scene comes from a comparison between *Final Fantasy VII* and *Xenogears*. Once again, the games feature similar segments that explore their main characters’ fractured psyches. In *Xenogears*, the depth of the protagonist’s dissociative identity disorder is eventually revealed in a long cut-scene conversation between his three alternate personalities that spans numerous flashbacks to his traumatic childhood.\(^{311}\) In *Final Fantasy VII*, the player is directly transported into the main character Cloud’s fragmented mind, where they have no choice but to violate his privacy and destroy his protective barriers in order to force him back to awareness.\(^{312}\) By turning the player into an active participant, by making them culpable and having them perform the searching and prodding, the segment arguably gains a much more disturbing quality than if the player had been passively watching the scene unfold.

In summary, game(play) and story remain very ambiguous categories which, once combined, cannot be easily separated. Whether a game is understood as a system (rules/gameplay) or is examined for its narrative capabilities depends, in the end, on the approach the researcher wishes to take. It is at best difficult to make a case out of videogames being led astray or being “tainted” by trying to tell stories, as Eskelinen does when he laments their supposed ill effect on game-system variety.\(^{313}\) For one, game designers themselves have come to consider storytelling an integral part of their creations; most big-budget videogames of the past fifteen to twenty years (if not longer) have tried their hand at telling stories, and there exists a host of helpful reference material for aspiring game writers (similar to film or theater script authors), such as Lee Sheldon’s *Character Development and Storytelling for Games* (2004), and even more general reference books devote at least one chapter, often more, to storytelling. According to game designer Jordan Mechner, “[b]y its nature, video game writing is inextricably bound up with game design, level design, and the other aspects of production,”\(^{314}\) hence it is difficult to consider it extraneous.

Certainly, there exist plenty of games, both digital and non-digital, which do not tell stories. However, those that do choose to tell a story cannot but do so wholeheartedly, making the story part of the entire videogame experience, no stitches required.

---

\(^{311}\) *Xenogears*, dev. Square (PlayStation: Squaresoft, 1998).

\(^{312}\) *Final Fantasy VII*.

\(^{313}\) Eskelinen.

4.2.3. Beyond the Rules: Game Narrative and Participatory Culture

Although complex narrative in videogames is a relatively recent phenomenon, experiments with storytelling date as far back as the 1970s, a time when the most state-of-the-art videogame console (the Atari 2600) only had 128 bytes of RAM, barely enough memory to display a modern text message. Although the limitations of computer technology prevented the detailed representation of complex characters and objects, some games began to harbor aspirations beyond bouncing a white dot back and forth between two paddles. The 1979 *Adventure*, as its title already suggests, is modeled after a classic fantasy tale: The player controls an abstract, featureless one-pixel square (meant to represent the human hero) and has to navigate a castle maze in order to find swords to defeat the (more recognizable) dragons lurking inside the labyrinth and recover keys with which to open the doors to the treasure vault. The treasure itself takes the form of a grail-like chalice.\(^{315}\) Neither is a word of dialogue spoken nor an explanation given for the quest, yet the player, familiar with the quest narrative from folklore, fairy tales, or a steady diet of J. R. R. Tolkien, is able to make sense of it. Wolf names *Pac-Man* (1980) as one of the milestones in the development of “character-based games” since it does not only feature recognizable characters (the yellow Pac-Man and his enemies, the four ghosts), but chooses to give them rudimentary personalities (e.g. “bashful,” “speedy,” etc.).\(^{316}\) The Pac-Man’s cheeky, gluttonous grin and the faces of his ghostly nemeses Blinky, Pinky, Inky and Clyde have long since gone on to become staples of popular culture in the form of printed T-shirts, toys, and even a television series exploring the adventures of Mr. Pac-Man and his companions. Other character-based games with rudimentary narratives followed soon after, often coupled with sizeable information booklets which allowed players to read detailed profiles of the characters’ personalities and learn about the origins of the basic conflict, puzzle, or quest presented in the game.

One reason for this development is certainly brand recognition, as Eskelinen states when he refers to narratives as marketing ploys.\(^{317}\) Unique characters and an intriguing story do have the ability to make a videogame stand out from the veritable flood of titles lining the store shelves every year; they provide the player with a context and a motivation for investing a considerable amount of money (a modern console game costs between $50 and $70) and time into mastering the challenges. A sufficiently individualized

---

\(^{315}\) *Adventure*, dev. Atari, 1979 (Mobile/iOS: Atari, 2010).

\(^{316}\) Wolf 97.

\(^{317}\) Eskelinen.
character design alone is able to relay to the player, at a glance, what the game has in store for them. For example, presenting a rugged, smirking young man clad in traveling gear and naming him Nathan Drake creates an immediate impression of the game *Uncharted*, the assumption that it will be tough, but fun, and, as the protagonist’s name suggests, full of thrill and exploration. Nathan Drake should, conversely, be as fun and thrilling a character as the game on whose cover he appears, since the player will be spending their time controlling him and experiencing the game from Drake’s perspective.

Furthermore, although it is certainly true that games exist to be played, few contemporary mainstream games are content to sell only their play aspect. What they are selling is an experience slightly removed from reality, the promise to let the player feel what it is like to be an axe-slinging barbarian, a cat burglar, treasure hunter, master marksman, spacefarer, ace pilot, wizard or dragon-rider. It is a weighty promise, but one that is expected – and trusted – to carry even beyond the confines of the game world. The *Uncharted* series provides an excellent example of this: During the promotion of the third game in the series, *Uncharted 3: Drake’s Deception* (2011), a contest offered fans the chance to join the developers and actors behind the characters of Nathan Drake and his girlfriend Elena Fisher on a treasure hunt/adventure vacation in the Jordanian desert, where the game was to take place. Such a contest relies on the players’ strong connection to the experience of controlling and “accompanying” Nathan Drake on his adventures, and counts on their willingness to transpose this experience and relive it in the real world. Feeling like Nathan Drake, following in his footsteps, even indirectly “joining forces” with the closest thing there is to a real-life version of the character (his actor) all lie at the heart of the exercise, past the obvious transposition of game elements present in *Uncharted 3* (searching for clues, shooting targets, rock-climbing, etc.). Hence, Nathan Drake’s character and his story contribute to binding players to the game, to the extent that they willingly engage in an act that at least partially transports this experience to the real world, a highly refined form of make-believe that reaches beyond what bare-bones gameplay mechanisms may achieve. At the very least, an enterprising manufacturer of chess sets has yet to think of offering players a chance to have dinner with their favorite rook and bishop.

The videogame narrative and its resultant experiences have considerable influence in the realm of

---

participatory culture,\textsuperscript{319} which exists independent of media coverage and marketing campaigns directed by third parties. Both online and offline, gamers partake in a host of activities that involve reliving and expanding upon their narrative experiences in their favorite games. This can take the form of the physical transformation into a character through cosplay (a portmanteau of “costume” and “play”), which entails the recreation of the character’s clothing and hairstyle, often even their mannerisms and speech patterns, to temporarily become said character in the real world. Fan conventions and photography meet-ups provide the opportunity to show off and share this transformation with fellow fans, for example by replaying iconic scenes or creating hypothetical scenarios for the characters. This transformation can also happen online on a textual level, where it is not focused on the authenticity and quality of makeup and costume, but instead on story and character voice. Through online role-play (typically involving two or more participants) and the creation of fan content, fans appropriate the characters’ personalities and histories in order to imagine new scenarios, retellings, rewritings and continuations of beloved game stories. They explore different textual genres or put characters into alternate fictional universes to imagine their challenges and behavior in different social contexts via fiction, comics and film (e.g. machinima, a portmanteau of “machine” and “cinema,” which describes the creation of films with the help of game engines). Some fans go so far as to create sequels to or expansion packs for their favorite games, although this kind of creative zeal tends to be met with mixed reactions from the copyright holders. \textit{Chrono Trigger: Crimson Echoes}, a non-commercial, not-for-profit sequel to the 1995 game \textit{Chrono Trigger} (widely praised for its unique gameplay and involving story), was met with a cease-and-desist letter by the original developer, Square Enix, shortly before its completion in 2009.\textsuperscript{320} Nintendo, on the other hand, has maintained a hands-off policy towards numerous \textit{Legend of Zelda}-inspired fan games, including the now defunct MMO \textit{Hyrule Online} as well as several unauthorized remakes and remixes of old \textit{Zelda} titles. In some cases, sequels

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{319} Cf. Henry Jenkins, et al., \textit{Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century} (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2009). Participatory culture encompasses membership in online communities centered around various forms of media, the production of new creative forms (the above-mentioned writing of fan fiction, among others), collaborative problem-solving (Wikipedia, etc.) and “shaping the flow of media” via blogging and podcasting. Citing the 2005 \textit{Teen Content Creators and Consumers} study by Amanda Lenhart and Mary Madden, Jenkins et al. point out that 57 percent of American teenage internet users could be considered media creators by virtue of their participation in these activities (study accessible at the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2005/Teen-Content-Creators-and-Consumers.aspx>).}

or mods\textsuperscript{321} are even picked up by the copyright holder and become officially sanctioned titles: For example, \textit{Quake} (1996) and \textit{Half-Life} (1998) have attracted many enterprising modders, some of whom have since been hired by Valve, the developer responsible for \textit{Half-Life}, to style their mods for commercial release (now widely known as Counter-Strike and Team Fortress). Fan involvement also benefits games which either never received an international release (due to an estimated lack of profitability) or whose localization is of substandard quality. One such example is the Japanese game \textit{Persona 2: Innocent Sin}, which was initially not slated to be published in America. In a year-long effort, fans programmed translation patches and emulators to create an English-language version of the game to be enjoyed by non-Japanese players overseas.\textsuperscript{322} Fans disappointed with the inaccurate and aesthetically unpleasant American port of \textit{Ar Tonelico II: Melody of Metafalica} are currently engaged in a re-localization project, which seeks to translate the Japanese game from scratch and improve its overall presentation.\textsuperscript{323} In rare cases, publishers may even resort to licensing the fan translation in order to keep the localization costs for games that have been deemed non-profitable to a minimum.\textsuperscript{324} A unique demonstration of the value game stories have among their players is the campaign founded in the wake of \textit{Mass Effect 3} (2012), whose ending left the vast majority of players disappointed and dissatisfied.\textsuperscript{325} The trilogy of games (2007-2012), which had built a reputation for allowing players to make far-reaching changes to its overarching story through character customization and decisions taken over the course of the three interconnected games, concluded in an ending full of narrative and logical inconsistencies, which not only failed to bring closure to the series, but also rendered the player’s choices and decisions entirely moot by simply not acknowledging that they had ever been made in the first place. The tens of thousands of disappointed players the world over took to the Internet to air their grievances, creating petitions for the developer, BioWare, to create a suitable conclusion to the \textit{Mass Effect} series and its story. Among the more notable efforts was the “Retake \textit{Mass Effect}” movement, whose participants sought to draw positive attention to their cause by donating over

\textsuperscript{321} A mod, as the name indicates, is a (usually unofficial) modification of a game or parts of a game with the goal of changing, extending or supplementing the original. This can include new content (e.g. challenges), new art assets, alterations/expansions of the narrative, or even major changes to the play mechanics. A person who creates a mod is known as a “modder.”


$80,000 to a children’s welfare organization. Remarkably, the publicity campaigns were successful: Roughly three months after the initial release, the developer released the “Extended Cut,” an altered and improved version of the original ending which allowed players greater control over the outcome, as downloadable content (DLC) free of charge.

All of the above examples show that videogames draw a considerable amount of fan involvement and effort that extend far beyond simply playing the games in question. Clearly, although gameplay is the core of any videogame, the stories built around and conveyed through it are far from uninteresting to players. After all, if only the rules matter, players should hardly become upset at low-quality localizations, or seek to accurately translate even the most minor fragments of NPC dialogue. In fact, one could say that apart from demanding player engagement and imagination when it comes to progressing through games, these same games also encourage and facilitate a different kind of play behavior, namely the kind of play Friedrich Schiller describes when he speaks of the play drive as a means of creativity. In the hands of enamored players, videogames are taken apart like toys, restructured, rewritten and reassembled to prolong the experiences they offer, and their stories are played with, edited, remixed, meshed together, or taken in an entirely different direction compared to the original from whence they came.

4.3. Game Narrative and the Renegotiation of Authorship

Many, if not all, of the above-mentioned issues with storytelling in games can be traced back to a common denominator. Behind questions of HUD and cut-scene integration, of freedom and immersion, lurks an entity heretofore unknown to the narrative arts: the player. Certainly, the player is a member of the audience, just like the traditional viewer, reader or listener, by virtue of being a consumer of a certain medium. As mentioned in 4.1.2., however, the traditional members of the audience are largely passive recipients who, outside of special narrative niche forms such as round-robin storytelling or interactive fiction, cannot actively influence the narrative as it unfolds. A videogame, however, needs the active


327 Downloadable content (often simply shortened to DLC) is a feature of modern game development which allows developers to add additional features or supply software patches after the release of the game. DLC can range from minor extra features (e.g. character costumes or area maps) to additional story content and gameplay expansions.

participation of the player in order to do so. Rather than simply moving a set number of game pieces from point A to point B, the player has to plan and make decisions with direct and immediate consequences which influence the narrative of a game in numerous bigger and smaller ways. This level of involvement goes so far that videogame narratives can be said to challenge an age-old narratological concept: that of the author.

The term “author” carries with it not just the notion of creation, but also a sense of authority and ownership; in its Latin roots, the author is a leader and instigator, someone who causes growth. The traditional understanding of “the author,” their role and purpose, can be traced all the way back to Immanuel Kant, who views genius as a gift of nature, the very thing capable of giving a work of art its unique allure and character. With such weighty connotations, the image of the singularly gifted individual understandably lingers on in the general view of authorship and creation, despite the fact that several aspects of postmodern society, such as virtual reality, online social media networks and trends in participatory culture, have long since begun to undermine it. In an age where every consumer of artwork, of stories, has the means to “write back,” to remix and remaster the original, to challenge and enrich what he or she has consumed, the old separation between creator and audience, sender and receiver, begins to break down. Yet, even though ghostwriters, online personas and collaborative projects all subvert the idea of traditional authorship to some degree, it is difficult to exorcise the ghost of the lone genius: For example, even though a standard Hollywood production tends to involve hundreds of talents (ranging from special effects and make-up artists to the camera crew, screenwriters, composers and actors), it is primarily the director who is regarded as the creator and publicly given credit for the making of a film.

Videogames complicate the question of authorship even further, as they are in the truest sense a collaborative effort. Who is the author, the creator, of a videogame? Is it the team of artists charged with giving shape and form to the characters, landscapes and creatures that populate the virtual world? Is it the game writers, who map out the flow of story and information? Is it the level designers, who painstakingly program the virtual environment one building block at a time? With so many people involved in contributing small but essential pieces to the completion of a game, the author becomes less a single person and more a nebulous entity, spread out across an entire team of artists, writers and programmers, which may not even reside on the same continent.

The concept of authorship becomes even hazier when one remembers that games require players to actively manipulate the proceedings – to make choices, to explore, and to exploit. While it can be argued that the player still moves within a framework of rules and narrative someone else has laid out for them, it would be a gross oversimplification to place the player in the same category as the viewer or listener. In *Game Design: Theory and Practice*, Richard Rouse refers to this player involvement as “abdicating authorship,” a term that implies a certain forced concession as well as a relationship strongly colored by power, as it is commonly kings and high officials who abdicate. Rouse uses *The Sims* as an example of a game that abdicates a great amount of authorship to the player by allowing them not only to craft their own characters, but also to set their own restrictions and goals (unlike most games, whose win-and-lose conditions are predetermined by the developer). Most MMOs rely on players to shape their characters’ goals, backgrounds and skills, as well as to determine their own mode of interaction with other players. Even single-player games like *Fable* or the *Civilization* series boast a strong sense of player involvement in the way the game unfolds by including a wide range of exploratory possibilities and customization options. However, even games that are more restrictive in their choices change depending on how the player approaches them, i.e. whether the player lingers instead of advancing steadily, whether they choose to complete challenges at random or according to a set order, whether they form attachments to certain NPCs, or even what type of play style they prefer. For instance, a player who chooses to complete a game at the greatest possible risk will have a vastly different experience from a player who spends hours strengthening their characters and unlocking all the bonuses in order to have the best possible preparation for any challenge to come. This is not counting the numerous players who delight in taking videogames apart to enhance their own experience, who experiment with the game settings, create mods, alter game files, and write patches to resolve programming errors, as well as the many games that actively encourage such behavior by providing players with editing tools, custom challenges, and Easter eggs. In short, the player is always in the widest sense a co-creator, or co-author, since the game only unfolds if it is played and moreover changes in sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic ways depending on how it is played.

Curiously, it is precisely this redistribution, or renegotiation, of authorship that is often held

---

331 Rouse 383.
332 A videogame Easter egg is a (usually) humorous surprise hidden within the game, e.g. an inside joke or reference to an aspect of popular culture, a secret message by the developer or a hidden level.
against games when the debate turns to their artistic merit. The late American film critic Roger Ebert supports his stance against videogames as an art form by drawing on extremely traditional ideas of the author and the audience. In Ebert’s view, “art is created by an artist” without the involvement of the audience, and is meant “to lead you to an inevitable conclusion, not a smorgasbord of choices.” Although the debate of whether or not videogames constitute an art form only touches upon the question of authorship in passing, Ebert’s argument is nevertheless grounded in an understanding of authorship that ignores all the modifications which the concept has undergone during the 20th and 21st centuries. Ebert invokes the notion of a singular person distilling a definitive vision, or truth, without outside interference or participation. The audience is the passive receptor who takes in the artistic object and its (singular, unambiguous, unalterable) message – anything else would turn the spectator into a creator, the viewer or reader into an author. This view stands in direct opposition to the pronouncement of Roland Barthes’s argument in his essay “The Death of the Author,” where he posits that “[t]o give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing,” meaning that the intentions of the author should not play a pivotal role in the interpretation of the work itself. In fact, the insistence upon a single creator who has absolute authority over their creation disregards the many forces which shape a modern work of art, i.e. editors, studio executives, marketing departments, political and religious groups which may oppose or embrace the work, or the influence of fans – for instance, some television series like the Teen Wolf (2011–present) or The L Word (2004–2009) solicit audience participation by allowing viewers to vote on future plot developments or encourage the submission of fan-written episode scripts. More importantly, it also ignores the unmistakable push towards ambiguity in all contemporary media, which can be observed in the numerous films and novels which are re-released as “remastered” or “director’s cut” versions, in the regularity with which major comics publishers like Marvel and DC Comics regularly reinvent and “reboot” ongoing publications to introduce new plot elements, in the major motion pictures which are re-filmed and re-edited according to the responses of test audiences, and in the countless DVD special editions which feature deleted scenes, storyboards, director’s commentary, and alternate endings which were initially


334 Ebert, “Games vs. Art.” This is to say nothing of the contradictions that arise when videogames and their narratives serve as the basis of or inspiration for what Ebert considers “artistic” mediums, i.e. film and fiction.

filmed but later discarded. Such practices hint that ambiguity in works of art and implied or outright concessions of authorial power are not only largely tolerated by the consumers of said works, but oftentimes welcomed, desired, even expected. What other reason is there to include discarded endings and deleted scenes if not to foster ambiguity, to encourage the audience to ask “What if...?” and cast the story they have seen or read in a new light, planting in them the seeds of further creativity? Videogames are merely the medium that has done so from the very beginning, unabashedly, seeing the renegotiation of authorship not merely as a gimmick or meta-commentary, but as a necessity for its creative process, experience, and storytelling. An understanding of the shifting role of the author and the indispensable transference of a degree of authorship to the player is essential to understanding game narrative, for if there are as many stories as there are readers, then there are technically as many games as there are players.

Kim Swift and Erik Wolpaw, writers for Valve’s critically acclaimed game Portal, describe game narratives as a duality, two parallel strings of narration that should ideally be meshed and merged. In an interview conducted by Brandon Sheffield, Wolpaw explains the design philosophy behind Portal in the following words:

> We had this theory that games tell two stories. There’s the “story story” which is the cutscenes and the dialogue, and the “gameplay story” which is the story that’s described by the actions you take in the game world. The theory was that the closer you could bring those two stories together, the more satisfying the game would be. I spent years and years reviewing games, and that’s something that always bothered me in games, where the delta between the two stories was real high. I promised myself someday that if I ever got the chance, I’d try to make a game where that delta was almost zero. It was a conscious decision that we wanted to try and keep that word.336

If the “story story” begins to rigidly dictate and interpret the player’s actions, if, in other words, agency is taken away and the role of the player as an author is eroded, so Swift, the player begins to feel frustration at their own reduced creativity and the forced reinterpretation of their actions.337 Game designer Mark LeBlanc frames this concept more sophisticatedly in the terms “embedded narrative” (put into place by the designer) and “emergent narrative” (produced by the player), a distinction that has since been used in a

---


great many theoretical works on game design and game studies. Game scholar Fraser Allison expands upon Wolpaw’s and Swift’s statements by recasting the different components of game narrative (and thus, the different authors involved) as a triangle:

![Game Narrative Triangle Diagram](image)

According to Allison, the computer (or AI) is heavily involved in the creation of narrative, as it counters player actions with an array of responses and governs NPC behavior, randomized movements, calculations regarding the success or failure of certain commands, and other parts of the game world (procedurally generated elements and actions). For illustrative purposes, Allison cites the example of *Grand Theft Auto*, wherein the computer is responsible, among other things, for the movement of the NPC cars throughout Liberty City, police chasing the player for violating the speed limit, or civilians reacting to the player’s erratic driving. Another example would be Sid Meier’s series of *Civilization* strategy games, wherein the player is tasked with raising a civilization from prehistory through scientific advancements, trade, societal improvements and even warfare. Here, the AI governs the growth and actions of rival

---


339 Procedural generation refers to the creation and assembly of data via algorithms. In videogames, the AI (computer) draws from a preprogrammed reservoir of data to assemble it “on the fly” in response to a player’s inputs through the use of various preprogrammed parameters. As a rather barebones example, a game may contain the data of various animals, and a set of their possible actions towards the player character (e.g. flee, friendly approach, threatened posturing, attack). Every time the player encounters an animal in the game, the AI will “spontaneously” decide how the animal will respond to the player’s presence. The conditions for which response is how likely to be triggered are usually governed by their own sets of parameters (e.g. whether the player is moving fast or cautiously, whether they are armed or have food items in their inventory, etc.).

civilizations not under the player’s control, not only determining which AI factions ally or go to war with each other, but which bribe, intimidate or cooperate with the player, refuse to take conference calls or attempt to initiate hostilities. These computer-controlled actions, though principally programmed by the developers, take on a moment-to-moment quality that prompts different counter-reactions from the player, thus creating a new level of narrative depth not entirely under the control of either developer or player. However, allotting the computer a third slot in the creation of narrative, the third point in the triangle that marks it as on par with the developer and player, assigns to the computer a level of independence and creativity comparable to that of human beings. It diminishes the fact that the AI (as Allison rightly says) is programmed, its parameters and range of responses initially determined by the creator – or the player, should they choose to hack the game and thus establish entirely new sets of AI behavior. In Grand Theft Auto, for example, players have taken to creating their own kind of fun by manipulating the AI’s gravity, friction and collision detection physics, which determine how game objects such as cars react upon contact with an obstacle (swerving, skidding, crashing, etc.). By tampering with these controls, players can create a world in which cars and other objects comically bounce and sail across the virtual landscape at the slightest interference, thereby creating a gravity-defying hurricane of pedestrians and vehicles. Although the AI is responsible for introducing an element of unpredictability to a game, it is not, unlike the player and creator, an independent creative entity but rather a tool which can be manipulated by creators and players alike. For this reason, the diagram has been modified to resemble a lens:

![Diagram](image)

Fig. 4: Division of Authorship.
This model treats the computer as a modifier of creator and player creativity, mediating, filtering, and reflecting steps taken by either party to influence the narrative process. It is meant to emphasize the collaborative nature of game narrative, and point to the ideal as described by Wolpaw, wherein the gulf between creator-determined content and player-determined decisions is reduced to a minimum.

The picture that emerges from these different views is that authorship in games constitutes a complex web of the constant negotiation and renegotiation of roles. The player is irrefutably a part of the creative process – their input is what brings the game to life, so to speak, what causes the embedded narrative to unfold and be filtered, altered and transformed by their actions and decisions. Naturally, this cooperative relationship between player and developer(s) harbors its own pitfalls. Taking player behavior into account is incredibly time-consuming, not least because players tend to push against developer-established rules and boundaries, experiment with bending or circumventing them, and establish new ways of playing. Steven Holmes argues that the success of titles like Minecraft – a sandbox game which allows players to build any object they desire by stacking cubes comprised of different materials – demonstrates that players “desire a more creative and generative interaction with their games than just following procedures or Platonic interlocution” and that player creativity ought to be taken just as seriously as the creativity of the developer(s). Sicart makes a similar argument with regard to the ethics of games when he refutes the idea that game designers have complete control over the game world and its morality. The player, so Sicart, is an active participant in the game experience and fully capable of playing according to his or her own moral compass, regardless of the developers’ intentions.

This observation rings true even outside the realm of ethics; players complicate and expand game narrative due to their active intervention – an intervention that has to be taken into consideration by the developer, who is no longer the sovereign creator/author, in every aspect of the game, be it the layout of levels, the challenges presented, the puzzles to be solved. In the context of the videogame, one could very well pronounce the author – the solitary creative genius with a singular vision – dead. However, in the true spirit of videogames, it would be more apt to say that the author has revived, respawned in the minds and hands of every player, who continue to do what they do best – to experiment, to challenge, and, in the truest sense of the word, to play.

---


4.4. First Person(a), Second Person(a), Third Person(a)? Player versus Character

Given the complexities of player involvement in game narratives, it would be easy to assume that since the player is not only a co-author, but also the person experiencing the game, the game must be about them as well. After all, if the game is not about the player (their wishes, their goals, etc.) to at least some degree, why would the player be an integral part of or even be willing to engage with it at all? Juul argues that, since the game is a challenge to the player and mastering a challenge constitutes a positive experience, “[t]he goal in the fictional world must mimic the player’s real-world situation by being emotionally positive as well. […] The goal has to be one that the player would conceivably want to attain. Likewise, consider this hypothetical advertisement for a game based on Hamlet: ‘Your father has been murdered! With much effort, fail to avenge him and die a meaningless death!'”

Here, Juul constructs an argument about game narrative based on a number of assumptions with regard to player motivation and involvement that rapidly unravels in the light of several considerations. First, there is little to support the idea that knowing whether a story ends in tragedy diminishes its emotional impact or its audience appeal. To stay with the example of Shakespeare, the prologue to Romeo and Juliet outright informs the audience that they will see “a pair of star-cross’d lovers take their life,” an announcement which has done little to affect the popularity of the play. Similarly, in Hamlet, the main conflict and its implications are revealed within the first two acts: it is made clear that the principal characters in the play have made or are confronted with dangerous, self-destructive or morally ambiguous choices – the remainder of the play is devoted to the consequences of their actions (or inaction), and the many ways in which the situation is slowly spiraling out of control towards an inevitable, if tragic, end. The reason why these plays have drawn the interest of audiences for centuries is not necessarily what happens in them, but how it happens. Inescapability, morally dubious decisions and even the protagonist’s outright failure to achieve his or her initial goals are powerful narrative themes which, if developed properly, can create an equally powerful and compelling gaming experience. One example is Spec Ops: The Line, a game inspired by Joseph Conrad’s novella Heart of Darkness, which places the player in the role of an American military officer who becomes consumed with his mission to track down a supposed war criminal, never realizing that he ends up committing similar atrocities in the process. Players of Spec Ops: The Line, akin to the audience of Hamlet, come to realize that

343 Juul 161.
thems is not a righteous role in a story of glory and triumph, but rather an experience of the madness of war, and, in wishing to grasp the experience, they will feel compelled to see the game through to its end.

Secondly, Juul’s argument regarding the need of a goal to reflect the player’s real-world desires and to be “emotionally positive” inadvertently turns the player and the character under their control into one entity. It assumes that the hypothetical Hamlet in the game is merely a player stand-in, a virtual avatar that has been assigned a name for the sake of convenience. This leads to the conclusion that the player must want to be Hamlet, and forecloses other reasons why they might wish to play a game from Hamlet’s perspective (curiosity, distraction, education, entertainment, etc.). Thirdly, the argument does not seem to account for games with branching story paths, multiple endings or choice systems which are not necessarily so transparent as to allow the player to anticipate the consequences of each decision in advance. A great many games include “bad ending” scenarios – not to be confused with a game over – wherein the characters face failure, defeat, or stray from their principles or valued duties due to choices made by the player. Since these scenarios are not intended as punishment (as opposed to a game over), but rather as possibilities to explore, this calls assumptions about player motivation and incentive further into question. Some games, such as Radiant Historia (2010), outright prevent the player from achieving the best possible ending unless the player is willing to first experience all the (optional) bad endings, which can be triggered at various points in the game. Finally, some of the most popular and widely praised games feature storylines and outcomes that are difficult to describe as “emotionally positive:” Final Fantasy VII is a game that features the emotional and mental breakdown of its protagonist as a central plot point and ends in profound ambiguity (it is left unclear whether the characters even survive). Silent Hill 2 is about a man tormented by guilt and sexual frustration who has to face the fact that he murdered his terminally ill wife (three of its endings involve suicide, insanity, and implied future tragedy, respectively). Shadow of the Colossus is about a man challenging a slew of nigh on invincible giants in order to resurrect his dead beloved, and not surviving to see her live again. It is at best unclear what constitutes an emotionally positive goal in these cases, beyond a very general sense of achievement like uncovering part of a mystery or reaching endgame. Given this, it can be said that the relationship between the player and the character(s) they control is anything but direct and simple – even in a game where a player can create their character from scratch, tailor him or her to their wishes (such as in Mass Effect, Dragon Age, or any MMORPG), it is anything but a guarantee that the resulting character will reflect the player’s personal
desires, traits, or behavior. Perhaps the best argument against the assumption that the player must want to be the character are games which feature non-anthropomorphic protagonists who may exhibit impulses and patterns of behavior that a human player would not necessarily share (e.g. Ōkami, whose protagonist is a wolf, the Kirby series, whose protagonist is a fantasy creature shaped like a pink ball, or Flower, wherein the “protagonist” is a gust of wind). Following the logic dictated by the player-as-the-character assumption, games which place the player in control of an animal, a mythical beast, an alien, or an inanimate object would make it significantly more difficult for the player to be the protagonist and thus present an unfulfilling play experience, given the player’s limited ability to mold their thoughts and perception to match that of an animal, an abstract phenomenon, or a fantastical creature. Hence, it would be better to assume that a videogame player is aware that they are engaging in a make-believe activity not perforce indicative of their real-world goals, desires, or state of being, and that any character-based videogame involves a renegotiation of the concepts of “audience” and “character.”

One element that has significantly contributed to the player/character confusion is the way the navigable space in the videogame is made accessible to the player. Unlike a film scene, which can only be explored by the viewer insofar as the director permits one of the characters to linger in a given set, players generally interact with the environments in a videogame on their own time, piecing together their understanding of the game world. This exploration is shaped substantially by the perspective the camera predominantly takes, and whether or not it can be rotated by the player in a 360° view or is fixed at an angle (often the case with older games, where rendering extensive, detailed environments was far too costly or outright impossible). By far the most common perspectives chosen for the presentation of space in games are first- and third-person points of view, with slight variations or combinations thereof. Each demands adjustments to the design of the game space, and creates a different play experience due to its strengths and limitations. From a design standpoint, first person games eliminate the need to render and animate a player character, as well as their motions and emotional reactions (e.g. responses to failure or success) during gameplay, by unifying the player’s and character’s perspectives: The character’s own narrow field of vision becomes the player’s, which leads to the game world becoming physically “closer” to the player. For these reasons, first-person perspective is often favored in puzzle and shooter games. It also finds application in the survival horror genre (BioShock, Amnesia: The Dark Descent) because it helps to focus the action or create a sense of oppressive closeness and vulnerability, since the player cannot see
what might be lurking just outside their field of vision. Third-person perspective provides the more remote view, drawing a clear distinction between the player’s field of vision and the character’s under their control. This enables developers to flesh out the character with a variety of animations, gestures and facial expressions, such as the character doing gymnastics, falling asleep or impatiently tapping their feet when left idle, which not only serve to express their personality, but also to inspire the player to experiment with different reactions. It further opens up the game world by freeing the player from the visual limitations placed on an anthropomorphic creature with their feet planted firmly on the ground, thus allowing an overview of larger sections of the game world, such as roads and full-sized buildings. This often proves useful for games featuring spatially complicated or close-range activities (e.g. parkour, hand-to-hand combat, riding or flying, etc.) or vast environments, as the more remote view provides the player with more information to develop a strategy and react to fast-paced action. In addition, this view allows for visual “treats,” e.g. the enjoyment of and atmosphere generated by experiencing the translation of one’s input commands into the character’s motions and actions, be they fluid and graceful, cute and clumsy, or even physically impossible.

While the camera in these instances is more remote, it nevertheless tends to stay close to the controllable character; less frequent is the bird’s eye view or god perspective, wherein the player is granted an overview of either an expansive portion or the entirety of the game world, and is relegated, as the term indicates, to the role of a god, leader or master strategist who oversees the movements and growth of troops or underlings, exerting large-scale influence over the conditions of the game world. This is the case with most strategy games (e.g. Civilization, StarCraft, Disgaea, Final Fantasy Tactics) wherein the player delegates various actions like resource collection, exploration, warfare, landscaping or the building of an infrastructure. An interesting marriage between first and third-person perspective is presented by the over-the-shoulder hybrid, which renders the player-controlled character partially visible by positioning the camera slightly above and behind them, thus providing a balance between the impression of physical immediacy generated by the first-person perspective and the player/character distinction and possibilities for action provided by the third-person perspective (as seen in Mass Effect, Resident Evil 4, Red Dead Redemption).

Despite the existence of “purebred” genres such as first-person shooters, which explicitly refer to the camera perspective used for the experience and implement it consistently, videogames are perhaps one
of the most visually complex mediums, not simply because of their range of art styles and graphical presentation (2D, 3D, isometric, etc.) or the interplay between interactive and non-interactive sequences, but because they tend to liberally mix camera perspectives during gameplay. One example is the first *Assassin’s Creed* (2007), wherein the (freely adjustable) camera usually takes up a position above and behind the player character. However, when the player activates “eagle vision,” a skill which allows them to uncover hidden objects and points of interest, the camera zooms into a first-person perspective, thereby reducing the player’s field of vision to the character’s, but bringing small segments of the game world into sharp focus. *Pandora’s Tower* (2011), which generally uses a third-person perspective, switches to a first-person perspective whenever Aeron, the protagonist and player character, converses with Elena, his sick love interest. Since the game is centered around caring for and finding a cure for Elena, the first-person perspective during conversations gives the impression that Elena is indirectly addressing the player, confiding her fears and hopes and conveying her affection and gratitude not only to her lover, but to the person in front of the screen.\(^{345}\) The tactical RPG series *Valkyria Chronicles* employs an even more complex camera, which seamlessly switches between god view, third-person and first-person perspective as the player controls a group of characters in combat. At the beginning of a battle engagement, the player is placed in the role of the god-like strategist, positioning characters on the field map and assigning commands which govern their general behavior in battle. Once the player selects a character to control, the perspective switches from the bird’s eye view of the tactical map to a third-person perspective centered on the selected character, whom the player can then maneuver around the field for a set distance. Once the character is in position, the player decides which action they will take (e.g. healing, attack, etc.), causing the camera to zoom in for an over-the-shoulder perspective in order to allow the player aim. If a character is a sniper, however, the camera will instead switch to a first-person perspective, allowing the player to share the character’s field of vision as they take precision aim with the help of a sniper scope. These shifts in perspective, which are tied to various actions the player can take, happen in the matter of a split second and constantly renegotiate the player’s role in the game.

The relative ease with which shifts in perspective can occur indicates that the relationship between player and character is much more complex than that of the player projecting their personality and desires onto a blank slate. Even though a first-person perspective seems to imply that there is no

---

\(^{345}\) *Pandora’s Tower*, dev. Ganbarion (Wii: Nintendo, 2011).
character, only the player experiencing the game without the distraction of an avatar, this is not necessarily the case. For instance, although the *Half-Life* games unfold from a first-person perspective, the invisible, silent character under the player’s control is given a distinct and unalterable name – Gordon Freeman – as well as a job and relationships to colleagues and friends, who possess their own perceptions of Gordon. Similarly, although the *Portal* titles could be seen as self-insertion games due to the fact that the player character is both silent and invisible, and the computer GLaDOS, who serves as the main antagonist, simply addresses the player character as “test subject” and usually attempts to mock or demoralize them by commenting on their actions rather than their personality or background, the game still provides the player character with a distinct name (Chell), and, should the player choose to experiment with the physics of the game, a distinct, female character model. Game writer and journalist Brandon Sheffield argues against the view of first-person games as self-insertion devices by stating:

We don’t generally take on the role of the character we’re playing, except as children in imaginary play. What most of us do is identify with the character – and how can you identify with a character you can’t see, a character who usually doesn’t even talk or have any opinions about the horrible things going on around him? […] What makes a game immersive or otherwise is not the viewpoint, of course; it’s the situations, external characters, and tasks that get you involved. One of the characters I’ve identified most with is the boy from *Ico*, and he doesn’t even speak a real language. The oppressive environments and his seeming innocence simply made him a sympathetic character.

In his guide book on game writing, Lee Sheldon similarly notes that the player’s empathy with distinct, independent characters leads to a greater level of immersion than using blank-slate player stand-ins. Even dialogue options for largely or temporarily silent characters do not constitute a means for turning the player *into* the character. This situation is parodied in *Portal 2*, where the computer core Wheatley tries and fails to engage the player-as-Chell in conversation. Since Chell is silent in the game, it is impossible, much to Wheatley’s bafflement, to give a verbal response to his questions – instead, by giving the command to “speak,” the player merely causes Chell to jump in the air, leading Wheatley to surmise

---

346 GLaDOS: “Unbelievable! You, {SUBJECT NAME HERE}, must be the pride of {SUBJECT HOMETOWN HERE}.” *Portal*, dev. Valve Corporation (Xbox360: Valve Corporation, 2007).


348 Sheldon 44-45.

349 Sheffield, “The First-Person Immersion Myth.”
that she has suffered brain damage from staying in suspended animation for too long.\footnote{350} In fact, the insistence on a silent protagonist as an immersion tool, coupled with an insufficient range of dialogue choices, can lead to an unintended disconnect between the player and the narrative, as the player is repeatedly told that the character under their control is them, yet they cannot make choices consistent with their personality and beliefs. This is the case in 	extit{Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3}, where the player is placed in control of a visible, yet silent and nameless male protagonist, who can only give responses at fixed moments during interactions with other characters. These responses are at times not even phrased in direct dialogue, but summarized by a confirmation text box extradiegetic to the fictional world: “You decided to [do this and that],” “You gave the correct answer!” The use of the second-person point of view solidifies the impression of the character-as-player-projection, yet the limited range of available choices creates an effect that is at best alienating, at worst disturbing, such as when the protagonist is confronted with an elementary school child who is distraught over her parents’ impending divorce and is contemplating running away from home. The little girl cannot be dissuaded; in fact, the only choice the player is given involves either telling her to leave her important belongings at home or to instruct her in the “art” of running away (the game particularly rewards the first option, as the little girl is elated and cheerfully responds that “[r]unning away is easier than I thought!”\footnote{351}). After this exchange, the player is not given the option to take any action to ensure the little girl’s safety, such as informing her parents or alerting emergency services (which are shown to exist in the game world). Instead, the situation is “resolved” through waiting: After some in-game time has elapsed, the player/protagonist can try to seek out the little girl again, only to be confronted by her frantic parents scouring the area for their daughter. The little girl is eventually found safe and sound, no thanks to the player/protagonist. This causes a conflict between the player’s intentions and the role assigned by the game: A player who wants to stop the little girl or otherwise defuse the situation can not only \textit{not} take action, but is forced to actively encourage a chain of events which they have every reason to assume will end in tragedy. Since the player is meant to project themselves onto 	extit{Persona 3}’s protagonist, they cannot console themselves with the thought that it is the character exhibiting poor judgment, because the protagonist does not possess any means of expressing


\footnote{351} 	extit{Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3}, dev. Atlus (PlayStation 2: Atlus, 2006).
himself as an independent entity (lacking a voice, conclusive body language or changing facial expressions). Hence, the illusion of the player-as-the-character is shattered, irrevocably destroyed, and the player will likely begin to second-guess their role in addition to the dubious ethics presented in the game.

The difficulties that arise when one attempts to merge the player with the character indicate that the mechanics working to draw the player into the world of the game, to inspire their investment, empathy and imagination, cannot be described as a matter of simple binary opposition. In What Videogames Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy, Gee explores the relationship between player and character to demonstrate how identities work during learning. To accomplish this, Gee reflects upon his own experiences with the 2001 RPG Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura, which requires the player to create their own character before the start of the main game. The player assembles their desired character from a variety of available traits concerning physical appearance, job class, skills and aptitude, history and personal background, among other options. Gee identifies three distinct “identities” while playing Arcanum with his custom character, which he terms virtual, real, and projective. The virtual identity describes the player’s identity as the character in the game world and the actions they take based on their selected personality traits and background. The real identity describes the player’s own set of experiences and skills, which influence the decisions the player makes and their skill at playing the game. The third, projective identity, so Gee, encapsulates the projection of the player’s wishes and values onto the virtual identity; in other words, the virtual character is a project created and nurtured by the player: “The kind of person I want Bead Bead [the character] to be, the kind of history I want her to have, the kind of person and history I am trying to build in and through her is what I mean by a projective identity. Since these aspirations are my desires for Bead Bead, the projective identity is both mine and hers, and it is a space in which I can transcend both her limitations and my own.” According to Gee, these three identities can fail or succeed in the game in different ways. For example, only the real player can fail to use the game controls properly, but the virtual character might fail to perform a feat due to the pre-defined aptitudes. The projective identity might be subject to failure if the player makes a choice that does not suit the character they wish to build, thus forcing them to start over.

Although Gee’s model acknowledges the subtleties involved in player/character interaction by

352 Gee, What Video Games Have to Teach Us 48-49.
353 Gee, What Video Games Have to Teach Us 50-51.
354 Gee, What Video Games Have to Teach Us 51-52.
making several much needed distinctions, the term “identity,” which is used to refer to all three constituents, distorts the relationship between them. If the character is an “identity,” does this imply that this identity is lost when the player never touches the game again? If the projective component is an identity, does it become supplanted if the player deliberately makes different decisions in their next playthrough? The distinction is also primarily tailored to fit games with a create-a-character aspect, such as MMOs and a number of Western RPGs. It does not account for possible difficulties which may arise when the model is applied to a game of a different type, e.g. one with a blank-slate protagonist who cannot be customized, or a game that offers pre-made, fairly sophisticated characters whose attributes, skills, backgrounds and convictions are determined by the developer rather than the player. Especially in the latter case, the characters possess a non-player-determined core personality and past, forming entities that are both less malleable and much more distinct from the player (Gee speaks of his created character as his child,\textsuperscript{355} a term which one might not readily use to refer to a character principally created by someone else, i.e. the developer). The relationship between the player and a pre-written character is strongly based on empathy – an understanding of the character’s motivations, agreement or disagreement with their views and methods, etc. – and is more reminiscent of meeting and getting to know a stranger, a character in a novel or film. In special cases, such as in \textit{Baten Kaitos: Eternal Wings and the Last Ocean}, the player is even given a role as a decision-making entity separate from the controlled character, a “guardian spirit” akin to an invisible friend or mentor whose advice guides the characters and who is explicitly acknowledged by them at numerous points in the story.\textsuperscript{356}

For this reason, it is more fitting to describe both the player and the character as “personas,” and the projective component as identified by Gee as a “process.” This recognizes the player as distinct from the character, no matter how flat or round said character may be, since the character cannot by default be assumed to be a mere extension of the player. Because this definition forgoes the concept of identities altogether, it is more easily applicable to games wherein the player switches between multiple controllable characters over the course of a single playthrough. It shares Gee’s concept of projection, as players will certainly, if given the chance, try to shape the character in their control. Yet, it accounts for the moment-to-moment quality that is not reflected by the term “identity,” since players may not only alter their goals substantially over the course of a game, but are often tempted to make decisions out of simple curiosity in

\textsuperscript{355} Gee, \textit{What Video Games Have to Teach Us} 49.

\textsuperscript{356} \textit{Baten Kaitos: Eternal Wings and the Last Ocean}, dev. tri-Crescendo, and Monolith Soft (GameCube: Namco, 2003).
order to catch a glimpse of the outcome, without regarding these decisions as a part of their “shaping” of the character (e.g. accessing alternate endings). Wrapped in this process of projection is also the concept of empathy, which, though difficult to measure and define, may influence the player’s intentions in a story- and character-driven game, where the gradual revelation of background information and other details might prompt the player to reconsider their original intentions. Overall, this adapted model is meant to reflect the complexity of player-character interaction, which cannot be described as a simple imposition or merging of two personalities. More importantly, this interaction should not be viewed as the one-sided relationship of puppeteer and puppet, since play experiences contribute to the player’s stance towards the character just as much as the player’s experiences outside the game may contribute to their decision-making process.

4.5. The Challenges of Creating Game Narrative

“Writing an effective nonlinear game story is a challenge because story and game are essentially incompatible. Their end goal is similar – each seeks to create an unpredictable, yet highly satisfying entertainment experience – but to achieve it, they rely on opposite constraints. The power of a story comes from its structure. The power of a game comes from its freedom,” game writer Mary DeMarle remarks on the trials and tribulations of crafting a narrative in a videogame. If one leaves aside the idea of a binary, adversarial relationship between “game” and “story” (which, as previously discussed, is neither particularly binary nor adversarial), DeMarle’s statement encapsulates a problem which videogame writers, scholars and critics have been struggling to solve since the early days of the medium. The perceived incompatibility between game and narrative is not rooted in “freedom” versus “structure,” but rather in the ways narrative has been crafted for the past several centuries. Outside of the realm of face-to-face oral communication, narratives have inevitably become almost one-way streets, highly structured edifices which transport meaning from the sender to the recipient. In most narratives we consume in our daily lives – be they (to borrow Barthes’s understanding of narrative) newscasts, e-mail exchanges, podcasts, high-gloss photo stories or novels – the sender and recipient no longer share the same time and space, which reduces the immediate interaction between the storyteller and his or her audience to a minimum. As a consequence, the narrative, too, is developed largely by the storyteller alone, and cannot bend to

357 DeMarle 72.
accommodate the individual recipient’s whims and fancies. In contrast, if sender and recipient communicate face-to-face, or rather (as has become common in the digital age) in real time, narratives once again become two-way streets, i.e. they can be immediately influenced by the recipient’s questions, opinions, and ideas. This type of two-way road is almost unheard of in traditional entertainment media (novels, films, comics, radio dramas, etc.), where stories are transmitted to an audience which is, in the moment of reception, largely passive, that is to say, unable to influence the narrative itself. In this sense, videogames are unique among the major entertainment mediums, since there is a physical/temporal distance between the sender and recipient, yet the recipient actively participates in the creation of the narrative (see 3.3.2). Thus, the challenge lies in finding new avenues of conveying a story and methods to adapt old narrative conventions and techniques to the characteristics and limitations of a game, rather than in any fundamental incompatibility between the two.

This becomes evident when one examines the way in which games unfold. Juul differentiates between two structurally different types, namely “games of emergence” on the one and “games of progression” on the other hand.\(^{358}\) Games of emergence set up challenges indirectly because their rules, which are few and relatively simple, interact and produce countless unique variations, which can be observed in most board and card games; games of progression directly set up challenges which the player must complete in sequential order to achieve victory, a type of design which is most common to adventure games, which tend to be modeled after the classic hero’s quest.\(^{359}\) If one applies this distinction to DeMarle’s statement above, it casts a new light on the juxtaposition of the pairs “game/freedom” and “narrative/structure”: The way in which challenges are presented determines the amount of gameplay variation which the player can experience. Naturally, since stories are generally very structured narratives, they tend to better lend themselves to the model of sequential progression. However, neither type of game is inherently superior or “purer.” Rather, in modern games, emergence and progression tend to be combined to varying degrees to create vastly different genres and experiences. Juul himself goes so far as to describe modern videogames as the product of the emergence and progression structures, thus neatly evading the pitfall of describing narrative as an intrusive, foreign element, as e.g. Eskelinen does (see 3.2.).\(^{360}\)

---

\(^{358}\) Juul 67.

\(^{359}\) Juul 72-73.

\(^{360}\) Juul 71.
The effect which these two basic design structures have on narrative is rendered yet more complex when one takes into consideration another feature unique to videogames: the previously mentioned navigable space (see 3.2.). Navigable space is one of the core characteristics of videogames; in most modern titles, it has become synonymous with the concept of the “game world,” a term which not only encompasses the spatial layout of games and the player’s ability to move through it, but its visual design, its fictional themes and background story, the NPCs which populate it, and so forth – in short, its navigable fictional space. Depending on the size, layout and richness of this fictional space, more and more actions become available to the player which warrant more and more decisions – whether to gather information from NPCs, to go spelunking in hidden cellars and mysterious caves, which quests to complete and how, and so on. The effect and scope of the navigable space is best understood when one compares the world of a game to that of a novel or film: In a novel, the fictional world, its characters and rules are unveiled to the reader paragraph by paragraph; although the reader can, in his or her imagination, paint a picture of Middle Earth to a story set in Middle Earth, they cannot wander off to explore this backdrop within the confines of the story. Their attention is guided by and all story-relevant information is unveiled solely through the words on the page. Similarly, the world of a film is, strictly speaking, limited to the scenes and shots which make up the film. One of the most interesting meta examples stems from a movie which depicts and largely takes place in a virtual world: In the 1999 science fiction film The Matrix, the main character becomes aware that he is, in fact, living inside a gigantic computer simulation which spans all that he has come to know as “reality” – however, the audience is only shown a tiny fraction of this immense virtual world as it is relevant to the story. Were The Matrix a videogame, however, the player would be capable of experiencing this vast virtual world in its entirety, and explore all the areas which would be considered irrelevant to and are thus “non-existent” in the film. In short, in a videogame, the onus is on the player to discover and piece together the fictional world; if the game were to simply usher the player through a series of linear set pieces, the illusion of a living, breathing fictional world would be shattered, and the player would quickly become frustrated at their inability to explore.

Due to these key differences – the navigable space on the one hand and the mixture of the emergence and progression structures on the other – game narratives unfold in entirely different ways, and writers have been forced to invent entirely new ways of constructing and pacing game stories. As Richard Dansky observes, “The players will chart their way through the game, each making their own decisions so
that no two players have an identical experience. It is vitally important that game writing takes into account anything and everything the player might decide to do in the world. [...] This means a videogame script must be both flexible enough to cover the player’s likely actions and sufficiently constrained to be less than infinite in scope.”

Dansky also cautions that a number of tried and true techniques of fiction, film and drama are ill-suited to game storytelling and only work to their intended effect in a few rare cases, citing as an example the concept of forced failure, “a technique for channeling the narrative down a certain path regardless, and sometimes in spite of, player action.” In fiction and film, the story often reaches a point at which the protagonist is betrayed, imprisoned or otherwise fails to accomplish what they set out to do, is stripped of all money and earthly possessions, or loses access to the skills and tools that were, up until then, their bread and butter. In a game, however, such a plot device can quickly become a source of frustration when the player finds all their rewards and achievements suddenly taken away. One of the most prominent (over-)uses of this technique in games is the unwinnable battle, wherein the player must face a particularly powerful foe in a struggle that cannot be won for story-related reasons.

No matter how cunning or well-equipped the player is to handle the fight, they are set to lose – sometimes, the game will automatically end the encounter after a fixed amount of time has passed, or artificially reduce the player character’s strength while enhancing that of the antagonist to an unreasonable degree. This unwinnable scenario is meant to demonstrate the strength of the villain and characterize them as a serious threat, yet it only forces the player to waste precious resources (e.g. items) to hold out in a fight that has essentially been rigged by an outside force (the developers). Dansky points out that forced failure scenarios are not only frustrating to the player, but also run the risk of becoming a pointless stumbling block for the narrative, since gameplay “generally includes its own cycle of failure and success as the players make their own mistakes and pay the attached price.”

Once brought together, story and gameplay exert a mutual influence on one another. For instance, the gameplay of the so-called “shooter” genre will demand a particular type of story, one which prominently features armed conflict and most likely a modern or science-fictional setting to account for the availability of firearms. In contrast, a story featuring dragons is likely to demand gameplay centered

---


362 Dansky 18.

363 Dansky 18.
around flight and aerial combat or exploration. The techniques which are then used to convey the story and to entice the player to participate in it are dependent on a number of factors, including the planned length of the game, its genre and primary target audience, as well as the available budget (as a general rule, lengthy cut-scenes tend to be costly; see below).

One of the most common techniques to ensure a balance between structured storytelling and exploratory, nonlinear play is “gating the story,” as DeMarle chooses to call it. As the name implies, with this method, a linear story is divided into several key plot points which function as gateway sequences or narrative “bottlenecks.” These bottlenecks are interspersed with sandbox sequences in which the player is able to complete challenges (some mandatory, others optional) in any order they choose; once the requisite conditions are met, the bottleneck event occurs, advancing the plot and thus opening up the next set of challenges. Although one can argue that this type of story structure still railroads the player along one preset path which is not influenced by their decisions in the sandbox sequences in any significant manner, bottleneck events allow the developers to ensure narrative cohesion and coherence, as well as provide the player with the opportunity to orient themselves according to these narrative milestones and enjoy a balanced game experience. *Assassin’s Creed* is a concrete example of a game built around bottleneck events. Set in the 12th-century Middle East during the Crusades, the game allows the player to freely explore the three historical cities of Jerusalem, Acre and Damascus with the aim of uncovering a far-reaching conspiracy among their ruling elite. Although the player can choose the order in which to visit the cities and complete the missions available in their perimeter, narrative bottlenecks are placed at regular intervals to prevent the overall plot from descending into formless chaos. The following illustration shows the alternation between player freedom and developer-imposed structure: Scripted story events open up a set of mandatory tasks, though the player can choose the order in which to complete them. Once all requisite tasks are fulfilled, the next scripted event is triggered:

---

364 DeMarle 74.
Each of the required challenges during the sandbox sequences provides piecemeal insights into the story (i.e. the motives and methods of the various conspirators), while the subsequent bottleneck sequence brings these fragments together and reveals their significance to the overall plot. In addition, a large number of optional missions and challenges become available for the player to do at leisure (e.g. races, treasure hunts, etc.), some of which serve to enliven the virtual world further, and others which merely exist for the player to test their mastery of various game mechanics. The careful balance between these elements ensures that the player is able to proceed at their own pace and to individuate the story experience to a certain degree without becoming confused or losing touch with the demands of the role they have taken up (the character of the assassin). An overview of several event chains in Assassin’s Creed thus reveals the following macrostructure:
The numerous event chains, comprised of scripted elements which the player can follow in any order they choose results in a narrative structure that resembles a nesting doll. Despite its streamlined appearance, the bottleneck structure requires vast amounts of planning and considerable ingenuity on the part of the game writer in order to avoid a disjointed play experience, repetitiveness, or gaps in information. In terms of gameplay, the mechanics must be flexible as well, meaning that the buffet of tasks at the player’s disposal must not require skills or items which they have not yet learned or acquired (which also increases the risk of repetition), and that the individual areas must not differ vastly in terms of difficulty (an issue which is remedied slightly more easily by tying the difficulty to certain conditions, e.g. the player character’s current level).

An alternative to the gated story is the “branching paths” structure. As the name suggests, here, the story is split into multiple narrative threads, diverging like the branches of a tree, which the player can access and experience by making story-relevant decisions. This structure has several immediate advantages: First, it allows the game writers to explore multiple story threads with relatively little risk of tangling these threads, since they all essentially unfold in different directions:
Secondly, it adds to the so-called “replay value” of a game, a slang term which describes whether a game offers new challenges and content on subsequent playthroughs. If a game utilizes branching paths, of which only one can be selected and completed per playthrough, the player feels motivated to invest more time in the game to explore the remaining story threads. Thirdly, branching paths give the player a measure of influence over the story itself. Whereas the gated story in the previous example remains essentially unchanged (i.e. how the player approaches the free sequences has no effect on the way the plot-relevant bottleneck events unfold), a game with branching paths encourages the player to make key decisions with regard to the story. Although the individual paths are, of course, laid out by the developers, the player’s involvement and their individual preferences play a role in shaping the overall narrative. One example is *Tactics Ogre*, which is set in a small fantasy kingdom embroiled in racial conflict and caught in power struggles between larger nations. The player, in the role of a young rebel leader named Denim Powell, is tasked with driving out the invading forces and fighting for the freedom of his oppressed people. In order to accomplish this goal, the player must carefully decide which alliances to forge and which course of action to follow on the battlefield. These decisions lead the player down branching story paths on which they may acquire new allies or lose old ones, uncover different sides of the overarching struggle, and, of course, experience a variety of challenges unique to the path they have chosen. One such branch opens up early on in *Tactics Ogre* as the main character, who has allied with a warlord for the
purpose of strengthening his own forces, is required to make a difficult decision: The warlord has developed a cunning plan to turn the tide of battle, which would require Denim/the player to turn his blade against civilians among his own people in order to make it seem as if the enemy forces have begun to commit war crimes. Faced with such an order in the middle of battle, the player is presented with a choice: to either obey so as to spare Denim’s homeland a prolonged and costly war, or to refuse to carry out the grisly task, which would mean to steer his poorly equipped homeland into a head-on confrontation with the larger and more powerful invading nation. Either choice develops the story in vastly different directions with a considerable degree of moral ambiguity. A refusal to participate in the massacre leads to Denim being branded a traitor who has to spend his life on the run, desperately trying to protect the few allies he has left, whereas choosing to commit the atrocity leads to Denim becoming an esteemed military commander whose actions have earned him the sworn enmity of his best friend and beloved sister.365 The decisions the player makes are mapped out in the story menu, which records key events by representing them as nodes, as seen in the lower left-hand corner of the following screenshot.

The larger and more detailed decision tree positioned above it allows the player to keep track of allies met, conversations held, and the outcomes of key conflicts:

![Fig. 8: The Story Overview Menu of Tactics Ogre, Showing the Paths Taken and Not Taken.](image)

Apart from the above-mentioned advantages, however, the branching paths structure can run the risk of becoming expensive to develop, since, as DeMarle points out, the developers have to create a large number of assets (environments, animations, recorded dialogue, etc.) which essentially remain unused.

outside of the particular story path which requires them. To put matters into perspective, if a particular level and all the events which occur therein only become accessible on one story path out of five, the necessary assets are nothing more than dead weight in four fifths of the overall game.

One way to limit the amount of divergent branches and plot developments is to create a story structure whose paths reconvene at specific points. Since two or more distinct storylines unfold alongside each other for a set amount of time, this technique is sometimes referred to as “parallel paths.” Just as in the branching paths structure, the player is given the option to influence the development of the story at certain points in the game. However, unlike the branching paths structure, these options only create minor diversions in the overarching story. Its general progression remains unchanged, but it incorporates smaller alterations based on the player’s choices.

![Diagram of a branching story structure with optional and required story points.]

Fig. 9: “A Branching Story Structure in which Branches Recombine,” in: Mary DeMarle, “Nonlinear Game Narrative,” Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames (Boston: Charles River Media, 2007) 77.

Although this saves the developer from having to craft an entire bundle of divergent plotlines, it runs the very real risk of alienating the player by presenting them with “pretend choices,” i.e. choices which do not affect the overall story, or worse, may end up contradicting it. A prime example of this is the morality system which is utilized by many modern games, and which promises to provide different experiences based on the player’s “moral choices.” Among gamers, these systems are sometimes sarcastically referred

366 DeMarle 76.
367 DeMarle 76.
to as the choice between the blue power-up and the red power-up due to their overly simplistic design. All too frequently, games opt to make moral behavior a binary choice between saint-like goodness and downright satanic evil, two paths which are marked by the extreme nature of their corresponding choices and which often do not mesh well with the overall story. For instance, in the story, the protagonist is welcomed as a hero by the villagers, despite the fact that the player has opted to make their way around the countryside by committing crimes and leaving a path of destruction in their wake, as dictated by the “evil” choices. However, this is not to say that the parallel paths structure is by default simpler or less interesting. Depending on the number of paths available and the depth of their impact, it can become extremely complex, as illustrated by the example of a single event chain in the 2009-2012 *Mass Effect* trilogy. During the climax of *Mass Effect 2*, the intrepid crew of the space ship Normandy has to undertake a dangerous mission, which, depending on the player’s actions up until that point, can result in the deaths of several crew members, including the death of the protagonist Shepard him-/herself (the protagonist’s gender and appearance can be customized by the player). The following flowchart, compiled by Hellen Alden, gives an overview of the most important factors which determine which and how many crew members will survive the mission:

---

368 For more in-depth discussions of the workings of moral choice systems in games, see Sicart; also Hinterleitner.
Depending on the pictured slew of variables – including the player’s diligence in upgrading the characters’ equipment, the relationship which their player character, Shepard, has formed with the crew, their selection of team members for the mission itself, as well as several other variables (including whether or not the player, in a previous story sequence, chose to immediately rescue their captured squad mates or...
instead opted to take time off to pursue side quests) – certain crew members may die or survive in this 
so-called “suicide mission.” The sum total of these variables affects paves the way to different endings in 
an otherwise linear story. In fact, the outcome of the player’s decisions even carries over into the sequel, 
Mass Effect 3, where it determines how many – if any – team members from the previous game will rejoin 
the crew for a continuation of the adventure. The end result is a highly complex game whose many small, 
parallel paths allow players to create individualized narrative experiences.

Apart from the specificities of story pacing and integration, directing the player through the game 
is another major – though ideally almost invisible – feature with the ability to shape narrative. Unlike a 
film or a novel, which are by default constrained experiences that guide the audience through their own 
progression, games are much more open experiences since they rely on the player’s input to progress. 
Because the majority of modern AAA titles easily clock in at ten hours of playtime or more, games have 
been forced to become creative in maintaining the player’s interest and attention. This cannot be 
accomplished by simply bombarding the player with visual spectacle, action or information. Although 
videogames have a reputation for being loud, erratic and garish, in the vast majority of cases, even these 
audiovisual explosions are carefully planned and paced to avoid tiring the player out. Rather, the player is 
spurred by a mixture of exploratory freedom and hints as to their next objective. Chris Bateman refers to 
this delivery of hints and instructions as “breadcrumbing,” which can occur in the form of specific level 
design (e.g. marking hotspots on an in-game map or creating virtual signposts as a means of orientation), 
or NPC dialogue. Although this may seem like a minor and inconsequential design aspect at first – after 
all, a simple textbox telling the player to go to a certain location could do the trick – breadcrumbing and 
its effectiveness are highly dependent on the context of the game. For instance, if the player character is a 
soldier in a war zone, it makes sense to deliver instructions to the player in the form of mission briefings 
or seemingly spontaneous radio communication pertaining to the combat situation. Here, the player – in 
the role of a simple soldier – is unlikely to take offense at receiving clipped, direct instructions or to

369 Here, Mass Effect 2 deliberately plays with the convention of suspended time, which allows players to put off plot 
progression in favor of playing mini-games, doing optional quests, etc. This can create rather surreal experiences at times, such as 
in Final Fantasy V/II, where the player is told that a gigantic meteor is days away from destroying the planet, yet it is only after this 
doomsday announcement that several sidequests become fully available. Hence, many players will choose to abandon plot 
progression for a while, leaving the meteor to politely and indefinitely hang in the sky until the player is once again ready to 
proceed with the story.

370 Chris Bateman, “Keeping the Player on Track,” Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames, ed. Chris Bateman (Boston: 
Charles River Media, 2007) 89.
question the narrative arbitrariness of certain orders, such as “Make it to the rendezvous point in under five minutes” or “Take out ten enemy snipers.” Technically, there is no rhyme or reason to the time limit or the number of enemy units, but because of the context (orders handed down from superior officers), the instructions will likely not be received with skepticism. However, even in contexts such as this one, instructions which are too arbitrary not only risk irritating the player, but threaten their immersion in the game world and their suspension of disbelief. An example of this occurs in *Metroid: Other M*, a game which takes place in a quasi-military context. The player character, Samus Aran, is an experienced bounty hunter tasked with freeing a space station from hostile alien life forms, and has been assigned a military supervisor to coordinate the mission. The supervisor restricts Samus’s access to various weapons and tools throughout the game, which makes sense from a narrative perspective since the space station is filled with sensitive equipment. This also serves a practical purpose with regard to gameplay, since the gradual lifting of restrictions serves as a step-by-step introduction to various gameplay features or can serve to make certain missions more challenging. Yet, this context falls apart when the supervisor demands that Samus navigate a dangerously hot reactor room without the use of protective gear, which causes Samus’s health to rapidly decline with each passing second. Again, from a gameplay perspective, this seems like an ordinary challenge: The player must complete the mission objective as quickly as possible or risk a severe handicap (depleted health points), perhaps even death.\(^{371}\) From a narrative standpoint, however, the player balks at the demand to forgo basic protection against the hostile environment for no given reason; after all, from a narrative perspective, the supervisor *wants* Samus to succeed in her attempt to save the space station, yet he recklessly endangers his subordinate’s life on a whim. To make matters worse, the player has no choice to either obey or disobey the order, and the superior’s arbitrary disregard is not treated as a hint that he may be a traitorous individual, either. In short, whether instructions are well-received and regarded as sensible by the player is a truly difficult task in nuanced, narratively complex virtual worlds.

Another technique tied to breadcrumbing, according to Bateman, is “funneling” or leading the player back to the path of progress in the event that they get lost.\(^{372}\) While it may seem counter-intuitive at first glance for the game to curtail the player’s freedom, to take them by their hand and point them in a direction chosen by someone else (the designers), there are several good reasons for the utilization of funneling mechanisms. For one, no game world is endless. Even the most expansive sandbox game or

---

372 Bateman 95.
MMO has a virtual “edge,” a point at which the game designers stopped adding environments and assets, or, for whichever reason (time, money, genre, playability, etc.), chose not to give the player the means to access them (e.g. many RPGs do not include climbing mechanics, which makes sheer cliff walls or craggy mountains act as natural boundaries in the game world). In fact, the bigger the game world, the more exploratory allure it offers, the more the player is likely to need help in returning to their starting point or in pursuing their initial goal. As Bateman notes, players may become distracted by side activities or wander aimlessly for a while, or simply not play the game for longer periods of time, which would leave them lost and purposeless without a hint system (after all, frustrated or clueless players are liable to abandon the game altogether). The simplest and most direct funneling method is to steer the player towards or transport them to a specific location or objective. Many games contain segments where players are held captive, so to speak, unable to go anywhere within the game world or accomplish anything besides the desired goal. The rest of the play environment may be walled off by hidden barriers, or the player may be scolded by an NPC, or receive a warning in the form of an impersonal pop-up. While this practice produces the least amount of variables on the developers’ part (i.e. they do not have to account for what the player might do, given that there is only one possible thing to do), it is incredibly invasive. Not only does it curtail the player’s freedom and creativity, but it can easily pose a threat to immersion, given that the player is rudely yanked from place to place by (so it seems) the invisible hand of god. There are of course instances when such a forceful method may serve a purpose, for example to enhance a tense or dangerous situation. If an important artifact has been stolen or the main character’s love interest is in peril, walling off the rest of the game until the player has successfully mounted a retrieval/rescue may seem justified. After all, it is doubtful that the protagonist would hesitate or take a detour to shop for new shoes if their loved ones’ lives were at stake or if the launch key to an intercontinental ballistic missile made it into the hands of the unscrupulous villain. At the same time, employing a funneling technique in such a situation can come across as a lack of confidence in the story – after all, if the world is convincing enough and the characters are well-crafted, the player should feel the impulse to save them without any mechanical coercion. A less direct method is to populate areas of the game world with particularly strong enemies or natural obstacles which the player cannot (yet) defeat or cross. For instance, a wide river can serve as a natural obstacle until the player has progressed far enough to have obtained a boat. In this context, Bateman notes that it is considered common courtesy to warn the player when they are about to
stray into such an area, as being suddenly attacked by a powerful foe or drowning by merely touching the edge of the river can be a discouraging experience and may leave the player mistrustful of the designers’ intentions: “Although it’s acceptable to shock the player within the context of the game, it’s not desirable for the player to be shocked by something in [sic] the meta-level of the game, for instance, by discovering too late that there is no way back to an earlier area.”373 Of course, which funneling methods work and which do not is once again dependent on the type of game, the layout of its world, its mechanics, and the characters who inhabit it. Bateman illustrates this point by citing the example of Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow, a game in which the protagonist’s girlfriend Mina gives out what he terms “funneling advice,” snippets of dialogue which provide her boyfriend Soma (and the player) with problem-solving hints or warnings. Bateman notes that this is only successful because of Aria of Sorrow’s overall design – Mina and Soma are trapped in a magical castle maze with no means to contact the outside world, and for the majority of the game, Mina is the only character with whom the player (as Soma) can converse at will. In a game with a less isolated setting and a large number of NPCs to converse with, Mina’s advice would not work nearly as well because the player would be surrounded by other things to do, and would most likely not feel naturally compelled to talk to Mina.374 In short, although funneling, just like breadcrumbing, exists mainly to ensure a smooth play experience, its integration and effectiveness in the narrative must be carefully considered.

These structures are but a few examples meant to illustrate how game stories – and game narratives – differ from their traditional counterparts. Although there is no end to the arguments for or against the use of storytelling in games, the fact remains that games not only practice storytelling regardless of such debates, but have also developed an ever-widening range of techniques and tools in order to lessen the friction between complete (player) freedom and the constraints of narrative cohesion and coherence. This is not to say that the above-mentioned methods are ideal or even suited to all types of games. For one, a lack of subtlety in the implementation can break the player’s immersion in the game world. A player who is railroaded to a destination by a slew of invisible walls or a barrage of warning messages, for example, will quickly come to suspect that the designer does not care about their desires and input, but rather wants to reduce the player to a spectator. For another, certain games value exploration and player input more than others. For example, visual novel games unfold via text (similar to the text

373 Bateman 99.
374 Bateman 97.
adventures of old) and only occasionally prompt the player to make a choice as to what to say or where to go next. In this regard, they resemble choose-your-own-adventure books more than sandbox videogames like *Minecraft* or *Grand Theft Auto*. However, given that they are created for the explicit purpose of simulating a novel, it could be argued that a change to their narrative structure would negate the visual novel genre itself. In short, in the right kind of game and with the right amount of care, these and other methods can create a rhythm between interactivity and non-interactivity, developer-created story and player experience.

### 4.6. A New Frontier: Games Shaping Stories, Stories Shaping Games

As this chapter has shown, the videogame is not only a new form of entertainment: It is also a new medium for the telling of stories. Although the statement made in the very first chapter remains true—namely that a videogame does not need to tell a story in order to be a videogame—it is undeniable that the unique properties of the medium have attracted artists and storytellers in great numbers, which can be seen in the vast majority of current commercially released videogames which aspire to provide a narrative experience alongside (or wrapped up in) the play experience. Although these attempts have been met with considerable skepticism on the part of game scholars, journalists and pop culture critics—whether it is because they fear for the purity and academic position of the medium, or because they adhere to a particular view of art and/or narrative—the allure of the videogame as a narrative medium remains strong for both developers and players.

The idiosyncrasies of the medium present a set of never-before-seen challenges to the age-old practice of storytelling; indeed, one could say that they demand a fundamental re-evaluation of the way stories are (or can be) told. This is by no means to say that there is anything wrong with or missing from traditional forms of storytelling, but simply that the nature of the videogame does not lend itself well to unmodified, traditional storytelling practices. Certainly, as Wolf says, videogames borrow techniques and “grammar” from older media to build and expand their narrative repertoire, sometimes to great effect. However, a complete one-to-one application of these techniques and structures hardly, if ever, results in an effective game which tells a story in an effective manner. This is, in part, due to the multitude of narrative channels which the videogame has at its disposal, be they visual, aural, static or kinetic, etc., but to a far larger part,
it is due to the purpose and influence of the player, who takes on the role of a co-author or co-creator. In essence, the videogame is a medium of incredible fluidity: ever switching, adding, and recombining channels, constantly trading, dividing and re-dividing authorial and creative power between a whole team of developers, the player, and the AI which governs certain automated processes in the game. No other medium currently in existence requires its audience to perform this type of mental gymnastics, asking them to alternately be actor and acted-upon, to assume the role of an author/creator and the role of a character at the same time. As game- and screenwriter Tom Abernathy explains:

Many of the storytelling tools writers have at their disposal in every other dramatic medium are simply not options when creating stories for any but the most linear of interactive media. (And even when the storyline is linear on a macro scale, as in the Uncharted series, there are still often microscopic decision points that vary the experience from player to player.) This is why so many game developers have had the bright idea of “bringing in Hollywood talent,” only to be disappointed when the talent in question handed in pages and pages of linear screenplay that were unusable outside the context of cinematics. In crucial ways, game writing is a totally different endeavor from any other kind of writing any storyteller has ever done before the first time s/he attempts it.376

The peculiarities of game narrative, coupled with the extreme popularity of the medium among all age groups and social strata in the US, invite a closer look, one that extends beyond the theoretical nuts and bolts. As indicated above, game stories are beginning to receive critical attention as cultural artifacts both within and without the wider community of players precisely because of their stories. Slowly but steadily, they are starting to be recognized as meaning-makers capable of reflecting, perpetuating, challenging and altering certain cultural values, story tropes and clichés, or themes which have been a source of fascination for audiences since the (known) beginning of storytelling. This relatively recent trend has been facilitated by the development of long-lasting online communities, the emergence of grassroots journalism, and the communicative possibilities (blogging, chatting, tweeting, vlogging,377 podcasting, etc.) of the social Internet over the past ten to fifteen years. Platforms like Youtube or the gaming-specific streaming service Twitch TV, which allows players to create live broadcasts of play sessions and directly interact with their viewers, have become spaces where journalists and regular players discuss, promote and


377 “V-log” stands for “video-blog,” which, as the name implies, describes a blog whose entries consist of (usually short) videos.
criticize the games they play, attracting thousands of viewers and giving groups which have been traditionally ignored or discredited – i.e. women, members of ethnic and sexual minorities – a chance to make their opinions heard. Game developers create forums and blogs on which they report on the development process of a particular title or solicit opinions and feedback about its features from the community of potential players. And finally, fundraising platforms like Kickstarter and IndieGoGo allow independent (indie) creators/studios to acquire a budget for development and reach a larger audience than ever before, which results in greater creative freedom and variety. This increase in diversity, in terms of both players and developers, has opened the doors for frank discussions of pertinent issues such as the entrenched sexism, racism and homophobia within the game industry itself, as well as the social impact of certain prevalent story themes and portrayals. A very recent example of this willingness to question and criticize long-established narrative norms and tropes is the wave of backlash against an announcement by the multinational developer Ubisoft, which stated that playable female characters would not be available in the multiplayer mode of the next installment of the historically-inspired and enormously popular *Assassin’s Creed* series, reasoning that the creation of a non-male character model would be too cost- and labor-intensive. Whereas the same issue likely would not have garnered much attention in the late 1990s (or, indeed, been worthy of an announcement at all), the response among gamers in 2014 was swift, vocal and, above all, discerning: Within the hour, the announcement had sparked involved discussions on gaming news sites, spawned thousands of reactions in the sarcastic Twitter hashtag “#womenaretoohardtoanimate,” and inspired a slew of critical pieces which questioned the decision to deprive nearly half of all players (see 3.2.2.) of representation, technical essays on the game design process and corporate decision-making, as well as fact sheets on the significant contributions of women in different historical periods. Other narrative-related topics which have gained traction with the gaming community in recent years are portrayals of race/ethnicity, sexuality and romantic relationships, player-focused ethical dilemmas, as well as portrayals of illness and disability. Notable in the context of this thesis is the small but growing number of gamers and game developers working to criticize and improve portrayals of madness in videogames, mindful of the fact that real-world mental illness is often

---

stigmatized. Examples include game jams which focus on mental health issues (e.g. Asylum Jam, which seeks to avoid stereotypical portrayals of mental illness/madness), charities and support groups for game designers and game enthusiasts suffering from mental illness, or the creation of games specifically designed to alleviate symptoms of certain types of mental illness (e.g. PTSD and other anxiety disorders). Although some of these issues (particularly gender and race/ethnicity) have been subjects of academic study for quite some time, they have only begun to gain traction in game-focused publications and communities in recent years due to female players and players from ethnic or religious minorities establishing stronger online presences. These incidents and the readiness to engage in critical reflection on game stories are indicative of a growing consciousness among enthusiasts that their favorite medium is no longer “just a mindless bit of fun,” but that it has become a legitimate medium for conveying cultural, social and personal ideas, ideals, attitudes, issues and experiences.

Due to the developments discussed here and in previous sections, research into the relationship between game narratives and other narratives of American (popular) culture is more important than ever before. As stated in the introduction, this thesis aims to contribute to this relative academic no man’s land by exploring the theme of madness in videogame narratives. Madness has been notably but necessarily absent from the discussion thus far, since the first three chapters were dedicated to providing the requisite context by establishing a picture of the role and status of videogames in American society and culture, as well as the workings of their narratives, which are all too often regarded as a less sophisticated, not particularly interesting subset of cinema. With the necessary groundwork now firmly in place, the following chapters will delve into the theme of madness – its relevance to American literature and culture, the wider socio-cultural context in which American narratives of madness exist, as well as the precarious connection between madness and mental illness.

---

380 A “game jam” is a social design event where the professional participants collaborate intensively on game projects.
384 Notably, issues regarding the representation of race or gender in videogames has been the subject of academic research for some time (cf. for instance, Anna Everett, and S. Craig Watkins, “The Power of Play: The Portrayal and Performance of Race in Video Games,” The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning, ed. Katie Salen [Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2008] 141-166), but the topic has only recently begun to gain traction in game-focused news outlets and communities.
5. Madness and Mental Illness in America

“Enough madness? Enough? And how do you measure madness? Not with rods and wheels and clocks, surely?!”

– The Joker (Batman: Arkham Asylum)

The theme of madness is a particularly sensitive topic, burdened as it is by Western cultural history and ongoing social issues – especially in America – which have kept persons with mental illness firmly on the margins of society. Few health conditions are so difficult to define and diagnose with any degree of consistency, or are regarded with such ambivalence by the lay public and medical professionals alike. Moreover, few health conditions have been (and still are) so widely misrepresented in the political and media discourse, have inspired so much verbal abuse and slurs, or served as reasons for dismissal and ridicule. Given this, it is necessary to briefly explain the decision to focus on and continually refer to “madness” in the context of this thesis.

As stated in the introduction, this thesis does not concern itself with mental illness *per se* – that is, with its medical categories, diagnosis, or any of the factors which may influence its outbreak or its course. For one, the author possesses no medical training and does not presume to be able to match the knowledge and insight of someone who does. For another, mental illness in the strictly medical sense is rarely depicted in works of popular culture, past or present. Even when a work of fiction is primarily about mental illness or prominently features an aspect thereof (e.g. asylums, psychotherapy), is purportedly based on a “true story” or is fact-checked by medical advisers and other trained professionals, its portrayal will nevertheless almost inevitably be fictionalized, that is to say embellished, simplified, euphemized, distorted or otherwise reshaped to suit the creator’s intentions and the audience’s expectations. Medical inaccuracies are bound to arise, either on purpose or by accident – perhaps the author has not been thorough in their research; perhaps they conflate terms or symptoms for the purpose of suspense; perhaps a lengthy and differentiated explanation would sacrifice the pacing or break the fourth wall. In short, the possibilities for distortion are endless, which is why medical categories and terminology can only be applied to a limited scope and degree. After all, whereas medical science aims to be clear and factual, fiction is metaphorical, often purposefully vague, emotion-driven, imagination-based.

---

A single line of writing can harbor profound ambiguity. In *Hamlet*, when Polonius informs Claudius and Queen Gertrude of Hamlet’s strange behavior with the words, “I will be brief. Your noble son is mad,” what does he mean? The question whether Hamlet is merely acting “mad” or whether he has truly lost his reason in his pursuit of revenge has fascinated literary scholars for centuries; the question whether Hamlet is “mentally ill” in the medical sense slightly less so.

Indeed, the theme of madness is far older than the modern understanding of mental illness, certainly older than science, perhaps even as old as storytelling itself. Shoshana Felman describes the theme of madness as “the most subversive of all cultural questions” since it has managed to subvert the boundaries of a considerable number of different disciplines, including sociology, philosophy, history, psychology, literature, linguistics and psychiatry. Lillian Feder, in her groundbreaking examination of *Madness in Literature*, describes both real and literary madness as “[…] a state in which unconscious processes predominate over conscious ones to the extent that they control them and determine perceptions of and responses to experience that, judged by prevailing standards of logical thought and relevant emotion, are confused and inappropriate.” Feder’s definition reveals a crucial common feature of the vernacular “madness” and the modern medical understanding of mental illness – both were/are influenced by social norms and artificial standards; they are, in a word, sociocultural (and frequently ideological) constructs. This is not to say that madness/mental illness is a purely fabricated concept, as some pundits argue, but it means that the criteria used to diagnose sufferers and determine who is insane/ill are far less stable and far less universally applicable than other more easily measurable phenomena (e.g. bacterial infections). Which behavior is tolerated as an eccentricity or a quirk of character and which is regarded as a sign of madness/mental illness is often separated by only a thin line drawn by societal codes of conduct and behavioral norms. (This can at times inspire truly metafictional portrayals in literature: To stay with the example of *Hamlet*, Hamlet himself clearly uses the societal norms of his era when he decides to pretend madness, and his uncle Claudius attempts to use these same societal standards when he decides to use Hamlet’s apparent madness as a pretext to send him away). In fact, although the modern understanding of mental illness rather than madness is regarded as a welcome sign of progress in

---

American society, given that it entails a more enlightened view which is meant to reduce stigma and prejudice towards vulnerable persons, not even this development can be regarded as universally positive. In his book *Crazy Like Us*, Ethan Watters describes in detail the “Americanization” of global attitudes towards mental health/illness, i.e. how standards of mental well-being are exported from America to other countries via missionary work, developmental aid, medical advancements, education and awareness campaigns. Watters posits that, depending on the culture of and belief system(s) in a given region, enforcing these American conceptions of illness and disease may in fact be less helpful to patients and their loved ones because “[…] even our [American/Western] most remarkable scientific leaps in understanding the brain haven’t yet created the sorts of cultural stories from which humans take comfort and meaning.” Although “madness” in the Western world is a decidedly negative term which has been shaped by religious dogma and philosophical thinking, the same does not hold true for other cultures, where madness is understood in different terms, e.g. as spirit possession or a disharmonious inner self. While the word “possession,” in the Western mindset, immediately evokes an image of a religious figure violently attempting to expel the devil from an afflicted person in the vein of Linda Blair’s character in *The Exorcist* (1973), other cultures have created different, and at times far more positive responses to a perceived possession. A view of mental illness as madness brought on by outside forces, so Watters, can have unexpected benefits for sufferers, because it prevents them from being regarded as “diseased,” thus allowing them to resume their social roles and duties within the community whenever their condition (temporarily) improves.

Finally, popular depictions of and attitudes towards the topic are both highly diverse and at times quite ambiguous. As will be discussed in subsequent sections, works of certain genres, particularly fantasy, alternate history and certain branches of science fiction, tend to portray issues of the mind in a manner incompatible with 21st-century sensibilities and medical knowledge. If the story is set in a time period or location when and where such knowledge would not exist, a character’s mental state is unlikely to be diagnosed or described in modern medical terms. If a character is, as is frequently the case in speculative fiction, not human (e.g. an alien), human medicine may not apply to them at all, or if a fictional universe contains non-scientific elements (e.g. magic, ghosts, kryptonite or radioactive spider bites), these may

---


390 Watters.
provide alternate ways of driving a character to madness. An illustration of the problems that might arise from applying 20th/21st-century terminology and categories to works of fiction comes from the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which is set in the far distant future of the 24th century. In the episode “Phantasms,” the android Data tests a program which allows him to dream, and experiences disturbing visions as a result: His friends have all taken up worrisome nutrition habits, seemingly intent on devouring parts of each other's bodies, while a group of strange, scruffy workmen are able to demolish parts of the starship unhindered. Concerned, Data consults a holographic reproduction of Sigmund Freud on the matter of his nightmares:

**Data:** (lying on a couch in a late 19th-century style study) Dr. Freud, I am curious. What do my nightmares mean?

**Freud:** I believe you are experiencing a classic dismemberment dream, or, in your case, being a mechanical man, a dismantlement dream.

**Data:** I do not understand.

**Freud:** Your mechanistic qualities are trying to reassert themselves over your human tendencies: Ego and Id struggling for domination. The workmen symbolize the ever-present Id constantly working to destroy the Ego. And the image of Counselor Troi – a female – is devoured by you, indicating an unconscious desire to possess your own mother.

**Data:** …But I do not have a mother.

**Freud:** Do not interrupt. The knife in its violent connotation suggests a certain feeling of sexual inadequacy.

**Data:** But I have no sexual desire.

**Freud:** (excitedly) Ach! Impotence on top of everything! It is all becoming clear to me now. …There might be a paper in this.

**Data:** (calmly rising from the couch) I do not believe I am being helped by this session.

**Freud:** (joyfully) Classic transference! Your anger toward me is in fact the animosity you feel toward your father. You are a polymorphously perverse individual, Mr. Data, and I recommend full psychoanalysis! I believe I can fit you in, eh, next Tuesday.

**Data:** That will not be necessary. Computer? End program.

Although the scene humorously exaggerates Freud's personality and his psychoanalysis, the consultation nevertheless makes clear that the once-groundbreaking theory is wholly inapplicable to the character of

---

391 These dreams are eventually revealed to be caused by the signals of parasitic life forms which are feeding on the ship and its crew. It turns out that Data's internal sensors, which are able to pick up the signal but unable to interpret it, have hijacked his dream program in order to make sense of them.

Data, a 24th-century android. The same, one can assume, would be true for most, if not all, human psychiatric knowledge. Even in the event that a work of popular culture is set in the present day and clearly features characters with pronounced mental conditions, its medical accuracy is often anything but certain. Frequently, the creators opt not to diagnose the character in question, i.e. to clearly describe and name his or her condition by using psychiatric vocabulary, in order to avoid criticism for potential inaccuracies or to have more freedom in developing said character further in future works. Last but not least, “madness” is a term which can be applied to character archetypes (e.g. the mad scientist) or even abstract concepts (e.g. a mad world). In these contexts, madness acquires an even broader meaning – it implies the breakdown of rules and order, an abandonment of or disregard for certain moral or ethical values, or even the pursuit of a seemingly impossible vision.

From this emerges that although “madness” is a term steeped in history, colored by prejudice and wholly improper to use in contemporary psychiatric/medical discourse, it is also the term best suited to subsume the representations of the various mind- and/or soul-related issues and conditions which appear in works of human imagination. This thesis uses the term “madness” not in a derogatory sense or with any degree of flippancy, but in order to maintain a separation between works of fiction and other creative interpretations of the subject, and the (medical) reality of mental illness. As indicated above, “madness” can take any form an author or artist imagines, is metaphorical, allegorical, representative, a signifier for change, chaos, instability, freedom, creativity, and any number of other things; whereas “mental illness” is a term used to subsume a diverse (in fact, some would argue too diverse) range of medically recognized conditions, which are, of course, none of the above. This is not to say that it is possible, much less appropriate, to keep the two concepts entirely separate. Madness and mental illness remain entwined, as they have been for centuries: Fiction naturally reflects, perpetuates and challenges commonly held beliefs and attitudes towards mental illness, both intentionally and unintentionally.

And fictional madness gains tremendous real-world significance in times of crisis and change. At the time of writing, Americans are conscious of the existence of mental illness like never before, informed about it like never before, and at the same time, inundated with images and portrayals of madness like never before. The US is currently in the middle of a massive health care crisis due to the staggering cost of medical care, the lack of universal health insurance, the bureaucratic complexity of all levels of the health care system, deficits in infrastructure, budgetary cuts, ethical quandaries and their consequences (e.g. the...
marketing and prescription of opioids for even small aches and pains), as well as shifting political stances towards particular medical procedures (e.g. birth control and abortion) and general inefficiency. Mental health and health care are currently of particular concern, not least due to a number of highly publicized tragedies involving persons with mental illness, whether as perpetrators (such as in certain cases of mass shootings, like the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012) or as victims (as in the rising incidents of police violence against persons with mental illness (see 5.3.2.). At the same time, madness has a starring role in films like *Shutter Island* (2010) and *Black Swan* (2010), as well as on prime time television in series like *Criminal Minds* (2005-), *Monk* (2002-2009), *The United States of Tara* (2009-2011), *Perception* (2012-2015), *Shameless* (2011-), *Hannibal* (2013-2015), *Elementary* (2012-), *Homeland* (2011-) and *Dexter* (2006-2013), is a firm part of superhero and supervillain origin stories in comic books, and keeps the thriller, detective and horror sections of the bookstore well supplied. As important as it is to keep madness and mental illness separate in order to avoid at least some of the issues and problems that can result from their conflation, it is equally important to acknowledge their connectedness – especially since both are clearly on Americans’ minds.

5.1. A Conspiracy of Cartographers: The Special Status of the Mind

Literary madness, as Feder explains, resembles real-world madness/mental illness in that it is concerned with altered states of consciousness. In the medicalized world of the 21st century, these fictional altered states, just like their real counterparts, are strongly connected to the concept-pair of health and illness. Although health and illness are universal experiences, as Susan Sontag illustrates with her metaphor of the dual citizenship – one for “the kingdom of the well” and one for “the kingdom of the sick” – which everyone is issued at birth,\(^3\)


the details of who is considered healthy and who is considered sick vary strongly depending on an entire host of social factors, including age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and cultural background, level and type of education, religious denomination, and social class. The absence of broken bones and bacteria opens up a biomedical and ideological gray area that, even in 21st-century America, is fiercely contested. In this debate, the first and foremost issue is not one of classification, of what constitutes a mental illness, of where the difference between a personality quirk and a disorder lies,
or even which criteria one must fulfill in order to be recognized as “of sound mind” – but rather of an almost metaphysical nature: Can “mental illness” be universally said to exist?

5.1.1. The Concept of “Mental Illness”: Problems and Controversies

The question of the existence of mental illness is certainly loaded, not least because the attempt to find an answer to it almost seems to imply a kind of disbelief and a willingness to deny what is, to many, a harsh and painful reality. Since it is frequently asked in the context of discussions about the status and role of psychiatry, its methods and its ambiguous position in the sciences, it has become a sore point for many a professional, as evidenced by Edward Shorter’s vehement objections to the notion that mental illness is an invention of modern psychiatry in the introduction of his influential *History of Psychiatry.* Yet, the determination of what is or is not a mental illness and which kinds of behavior are or are not pathological, certainly has a strong social component: What is defined as a neurosis or disorder is, in absence of a definitive (biomedical) cause, more often than not dependent on whether there exists a social/cultural consensus to treat it as a medical condition. For instance, seizures and hallucinations, which are now classified as symptoms of neurological or psychiatric disorder, are sometimes regarded as signs of spiritual communion outside the mold of contemporary Western medicine. Western (particularly European) history itself supplies many an account of influential figures citing visions and voices as the inspiration for their deeds – among them Socrates and Joan of Arc – who are now speculated to have been afflicted with epilepsy or schizophrenia. Foucault hypothesizes that the concept of mental illness arose in the wake of and partially in response to the social shifts which occurred towards the end of the Middle Ages, such as the disappearance of leprosy and the reorientation of European society towards reason and temperance.

Another indicator of this social component is the comparative ease with which undesirable behavior can be pathologized and reinterpreted as an indicator of a supposedly disturbed, irrational mind. The history of psychiatry is unfortunately full of diagnoses without a sound scientific basis, some born from a genuine

---


lack of knowledge about the human body and the workings of the brain, others fostered by a political agenda, and still others based on bizarre myths mixed with racism or sexism. Drapetomania is but one such fictitious diagnosis, introduced by the American physician Samuel Cartwright in the pre-Civil War era in order to discredit runaway slaves by portraying their desire to escape captivity as the symptom of a serious mental illness (the “cure” for drapetomania, as Cartwright suggests without a hint of irony, is “whipping the devil out of them”397). Another is hysteria, the 19th-century blanket diagnosis for a wide variety of behaviors deemed “unseemly” for women, which was partially constructed from the Victorian female ideal of passivity and the belief in the “wandering womb,” the idea that the uterus could move freely throughout the body between pregnancies and cause any number of health problems for women.398 Questionable methods and debates for or against the recognition of certain behaviors as disorders are not confined to the annals of history; they can also be found in the form of present-day controversies surrounding questions of health care and diagnostic frameworks. One of the biggest and hardest-fought struggles is certainly the removal of homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), which constitutes the most comprehensive and influential reference work for psychiatrists, researchers, policy makers and health insurance providers worldwide. Since its first publication in 1952, the DSM listed homosexuality as a “sociopathic personality disturbance” attributed to Freudian ideas of traumatic parent-child relationships, a highly damaging diagnosis which was only officially redacted in 1973399 and finally removed from the manual in its revision of 1974. However, other issues continue to persist, as the most recent revision (2012/2013) of the reference handbook shows. Among the heavily criticized changes in this most recent fifth revision (DSM-5) are the medicalization of previously “normal” conditions (e.g. grieving a loved one’s death), attempts to create preemptive diagnoses (e.g. “attenuated psychosis syndrome,” intended to refer to people who might be at risk of developing psychosis), to the continued pathologization of


398 Cf. for example Lana Thompson, The Wandering Womb: A Cultural History of Outrageous Beliefs About Women (Amherst: Prometheus, 1999).

behaviors related to gender identity and sexuality (e.g. transgender identity, cross-dressing).

Moreover, concerns have been raised with regard to the scientific integrity of the revision in general, such as the undue secrecy of the process – exemplified in the signing of nondisclosure agreements by all panel members in charge of the revision – or the fact that the majority of members in the editing task force maintain strong financial ties to the pharmaceutical industry. If nothing else, these issues highlight that mental illnesses, more than any other type of illness, are dependent on cultural consensus and economic interests, that they are, in essence, constructed. Of course, this is not to say that mental illnesses are the fabrications of drug companies, but merely that the specifics of the diagnostic process are vulnerable to bias and subject to social norms. To use a specific example, the decision to classify transgender persons as having “gender identity disorder/gender dysphoria” is rooted in the gender binary and suggests that a person is ill and needs to be “cured” if their gender does not correspond to their sex. Not only can this classification serve as a justification for discrimination against transgender people, but it is in fact outpaced by American mainstream attitudes, as evidenced by the increasing presence of social activism and movements centered around the acceptance of queer people in the United States. Another example is the abolition of the individual classifications for autism spectrum disorder from the DSM-5, such as Asperger’s syndrome. These individual classifications have been replaced by a scale which allows psychiatrists to rate patients according to the severity of their autistic symptoms, since the diagnostic criteria for the individual disorders have been deemed too vague to permit accurate assessments. While this decision does, in effect, remove Asperger’s as a specific diagnosis (and, incidentally, eliminates “Asperger’s” as a pop-cultural shorthand for socially awkward, nerdy characters), it does not mean that the symptoms previously subsumed under the name are no longer recognized as signs of a disorder.

Due to the over reliance of psychiatry on the pathologization of behavior, several sociologists, medical professionals and other scientists argue against the universality of mental illness. Psychiatrist Thomas Szasz, one of the most well-known 20th-century critics of the methods of diagnosis in his profession, argues in his publications that there exist very few “real” mental illnesses – i.e. those which

---


have been definitively linked to a biological cause, like Alzheimer’s disease – and that those conditions which cannot be traced to their biological roots are actually disease-like conditions which relay an individual’s “problems in living.” 402 Szasz first developed this stance in the early 1960s in response to the growing misuse of psychiatry, namely its application to the challenges of everyday life (e.g. stress at work), and the rampant usage of psychiatric drugs, most commonly tranquilizers, to the point where they acquired nicknames such as “mother’s little helper.” Other scholars are similarly critical of the concept of mental illness, if for different reasons. In a more recent work (2002), the medical sociologist Allan Horwitz questions the validity of the majority of officially recognized mental disorders, criticizing the over-reliance on symptom-based approaches to diagnosis and the lingering influence of Freudian psychoanalytic theory. By drawing cross-cultural comparisons, Horwitz argues that even the attempts to understand mental illness on a biological (i.e. genetic) basis are unsatisfactory, since the rates of most mental disorders are far from consistent across different cultures. Instead, he proposes that only “harmful internal dysfunction[s]” ought to be classified as mental illnesses, which he defines as those conditions that arise “in the absence of any cause that would expectably give rise to them, be of severity and/or duration disproportionate to their precipitating cause, or persist after the causes that gave rise to them disappeared.” 403 Edward Shorter, though wary of critics of psychiatry, nevertheless favors a biological approach to it and implicitly supports an entirely biological definition of mental illness by proclaiming that, “If there is one central intellectual reality at the end of the twentieth century, it is that […] treating mental illness as a genetically influenced disorder of the brain chemistry […] has been a smashing success,” something that only happened because psychiatry began to recognize the “primacy of the brain.” 404 He further discourages the emphasis on the “uniqueness of the individual,” which is liable to hamper attempts at developing a proper classification of mental disorders. 405 Anne Rogers and David Pilgrim’s perspective on mental illness, however, is oriented in the opposite direction. In A Sociology of Mental Health and Illness, they make a case against the attempt to treat mental illness as a “brain disease” by using a slightly unusual but nevertheless illustrative comparison: “[T]he ine can be prevented quite

---


404 Shorter vii; viii.

405 Shorter 297.
effectively by chopping off the hands of perpetrators, but hands do not cause theft. Likewise, a person
shocked following a car crash may feel better by taking a minor tranquilizer, but their state is clearly
environmentally induced. The thief’s hands and the car crash victim’s brain are merely biological
mediators in a wider set of personal, economic and social relationships.”

What can be garnered from these issues and perspectives is that despite all the advancements in
science and medical technology, the human mind is still far from fully understood, with many of its
workings – or failings – remaining mysterious and unpredictable. The fact that the mind, along with
inquiries into its soundness and unsoundness, is such a battleground, where the freshest scientific
discoveries, cutting-edge technology, political and religious ideologies, social movements and critiques,
philosophical ruminations, economic interests and many other considerations all clash against each other
in a struggle to produce guidelines and definitions to suit their given purposes, makes it all the more
interesting from a narrative perspective, and all the more delicate to study. On the one hand, this
profound ambiguity allows for a wealth of storytelling approaches to the mind, mental issues, and
madness, be they in the form of a Shakespearean drama or a lighthearted 20th-century adventure game. On
the other hand, it requires treading carefully. Although literary madness and real-world mental illness are
not one and the same, fictional depictions of madness inevitably draw from very real circumstances (e.g.
commonly held beliefs or knowledge) and are able to influence reality to a great extent (see Chapter 6). In
fact, one of the primary reasons why the topics of madness and mental illness remain so controversial
even well into the 21st century is that the mind (or, as it shall alternately be referred to in accordance with
respective authors, the psyche, or soul) occupies a special position in Western thinking. Unlike many non-
western cultures in which the mind and body form an inseparable conceptual whole, the majority of
Western philosophy and theological writing draws distinctions between the two, be it the classical
opposition of the mortal body and the immortal soul, or the image of the impure body and the pure mind.
By separating the two concepts categorically and thus enhancing their meaning- and value-laden
differences, the mind/soul became not only more important than the body in a metaphysical sense, but
also more vulnerable. Modern America, especially, is preoccupied not just with the fragility of health in
general, which is often framed as a precious commodity to be protected from harmful environmental

---

influences, but with the fragility of the mind in particular, encapsulated in the devastatingly reductive certainty of “cogito ergo sum.”

5.1.2. Mind Matters: The Separation of Body and Mind in Western Thought

It is probably a tad unfair to place the blame for the separation of the body and mind solely at the feet of René Descartes, whose famous philosophical contemplations are often said to be at the core of the supposed disregard for the feelings, personalities and individuality of patients in traditional biomedicine, and are deemed responsible for designating issues of the mind as the responsibility of an entirely separate profession. However, signs pointing towards a conception of the body and mind (or soul, or psyche, in short, the core of a person’s self) as distinct and diametrically opposed entities can already be found in much earlier religious and philosophical texts. One particularly influential source are the writings of the ancient Greek philosophers, most notably Socrates and Plato, whose treatises served as an inspiration for much of Descartes’s own work. For Plato, all matter and physical experience is transient, and pales in comparison to Ideas, abstract forms which are eternal, divorced from the material world and thus the highest form of truth there is. For instance, in his Symposium, the priestess Diotima speaks of love as the love for beauty, which a lover gradually ascends like a ladder, moving from the love of a beautiful body to ever higher degrees of abstraction, until he reaches the highest level: love for beauty itself, the pure, Platonic Idea. Plato applies the same reasoning to the mind/soul, most notably in Phaedo, in which he describes a discussion on the nature of the soul that his teacher Socrates holds with his students upon his deathbed. In a series of arguments, Socrates postulates that the soul, which gives the body life, is immortal and imperishable, while the body, being its opposite, is mortal. He also states that the soul/mind cannot perceive truth (Ideas) as long as it is locked within the body, whose senses and sensations deceive or distract it: “And thought is best when the mind is gathered into herself and none of these things trouble her — neither sounds nor sights nor pain nor any pleasure — when she takes leave of the body, and has as little as possible to do with it, when she has no bodily sense or desire, but is aspiring after true

---


409 Plato, “Phaedo,” The Trial and Death of Socrates: Four Dialogues, ed. Shane Weller, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1992) 86. It should be noted that the translation uses mind and soul interchangeably to refer to a person’s essence, and since both terms are placed in a very similar relation to the body, they shall here be referred to as one pair.
Here, the opposition of body and soul/mind is already explicit and presented as a fact, as a proof of the afterlife. It is only the body that can experience pain, and only the body that is mortal – given this, illness could be viewed as another “distraction” originating from the body (and further proof of its mortality), which, following Plato’s train of thought, implies that the soul/mind, being immortal and thus the opposite of the body, could never fall ill. On the one hand, these considerations are comforting, providing reassurance that the self can leave the fragile mortal husk and endure indefinitely, finally able to perceive things as they truly are, and not as the body interprets them. On the other hand, this line of thought places infinitely greater importance on the mind and its purity – and where there is purity, the chance of corruption is ever present.

This development can be found in the writings of Christian theologians, although it should be noted that its Biblical roots are heavily contested. Several scholars have theorized that nephesh, the Hebrew word commonly translated as “soul,” was not used in a dualistic, but rather a holistic sense, referring to the being in its entirety, and several writers of the 17th and 18th centuries – including John Milton, Thomas Hobbes and Francis Blackburne – expressed a similarly holistic viewpoint that does not regard the soul as by default immortal and eternal. Nevertheless, the dualistic concept dominates Christian theology and philosophy for the majority of European and American history. More than that, however, the body and soul/mind begin to be associated with distinctive sets of value judgments. One particularly illustrative example can be found in the teachings of the 3rd-century prophet Mani, founder of Manichaeism, which describe the relationship between soul and body as one of adversity, in accordance with the dualistic principle of good and evil: The soul, of divine origin, is trapped within the material body, experiencing the pain of captivity. Augustine of Hippo, arguing against the Manichaean belief system, describes humans as amalgams of body and soul, yet, following the Platonic school of thought, sees the two components in a hierarchical relationship in which the soul is superior to the body. St. Bernard, too, supports the idea of the body as subordinate to the soul, going so far as to say that the moral beauty of the soul is reflected

---

410 Plato, “Phaedo” 63.
in the outward physical beauty of the body:

> When the brightness of beauty has replenished to overflowing the recesses of the heart, it is necessary that it should emerge into the open, just like the light hidden under a bushel […] The body is an image of the mind, which, like an effulgent light scattering forth its rays, is diffused through its members and senses, shining through in action, discourse, appearance, movement […].

The mind/body duality also accompanied the Puritans on their journey across the Atlantic, framed once more in less benign terms. Their strong work ethic, as well as their emphasis on asceticism and utilitarianism, led the Puritans to reject physical indulgences: The body was thought of as a tool, which, though meant to obey the command of the soul, was seen as the gateway for the devil in his attempts to take possession of an individual. This in turn gave rise to a rhetoric which described the body as weak, perfidious and hostile: “So soon as we rise in the morning, we go forth to fight with two mighty giants, the world and the devil; and whom do we take with us but a traitor, this brittle flesh, which is ready to yield up to the enemy at every assault?” The only option, according to Puritan belief, was to fortify this frail prison, to control and strengthen the body rigorously. Illness was spoken of in a physical sense, a punishment to be endured as a result of the Fall, yet, at the same time, it was interpreted as a sign of the devil’s efforts to gain access to the soul. Anyone lacking in discipline and engaging in improper conduct was seen as inviting Satanic corruption of their very soul – taken the other way around, expressions of a disordered mind/soul (e.g. melancholia or mania) were often seen as a result of sinful behavior: The main hope for a cure was seen in the confession of the sinner’s “Guilt, Impotence, and Unworthiness.” These and similar Christian associations of vices with the corruption of a person’s very essence went on to form an integral part of early psychiatric theories such as moral treatment, which presumed a direct connection between acts of impropriety or overindulgence and madness/mental illness.

As far as the splitting of the soul/mind from the body is concerned, René Descartes’s ruminations fit into a centuries-long trend in Western philosophy and religious doctrine to conceptually separate the two. What makes his ideas so unique and influential is that they revolutionized the Western

---

416 Reis 19-20.
approach to and study of the natural world – they created a basis for logical argumentation, evidence-based scientific discourse, and allowed medicine to abandon its mystical roots by laying the foundation for anatomical studies. A perhaps not wholly intended side effect of this success, however, was that the position of the mind as separate, special, distinct from the physical body was cemented completely. By calling everything he knows, suspects or holds to be self-evident into question, Descartes arrives at the only fact of which he can be certain, namely his own existence, proven via his doubting of the same. He concludes:

I knew from this that I was a substance, the whole essence or nature of which was to think and which, in order to exist, has no need of any place and does not depend on anything material. Thus this self – that is, the soul by which I am what I am – is completely distinct from the body and is even easier to know than it, and even if the body did not exist the soul would still be everything that is.418

Descartes sees the body as analogous to a machine, explaining many of its functions, such as muscle contraction, via mechanical principles.419 To him, the body, whether healthy or sick, is nothing more than a clockwork, an automaton “so built and composed of bones, nerves, muscles, veins, blood, and skin that even if there were no mind in it, it would not cease to move in all the ways it does at present when it is not moved under the direction of the will.”420 This prosaic conception of the body as an object entirely separate from the mind, or the whole self, opened doors for medicine in particular: Until that point, religious doctrine had prohibited autopsies, dissections and other anatomical studies since it was believed that damage dealt to the human body, even after death, would prevent the soul from passing on to heaven.421 Descartes’ formulations coincided with a pan-European trend towards secularization, the separation of church and state, and growing support for the belief that humans had the means to make sense of, organize and exert control over the world around them – the ideas of the Enlightenment, propagated by Descartes, Francis Bacon, John Locke and other early philosopher-scientists, were beginning to oust the long-standing ideas of mysticism, which attributed a great many phenomena to supernatural influences or developed theories which were, by the standards of rationalism and empiricism, impossible to prove. Indeed, the emphasis on empirical proof in the emergent scientific tradition –

421 Mehta 202.
knowledge obtained only via sensory experience, replicable experiments and physical evidence—had unintended consequences for the discipline of medicine, whose practitioners readily embraced the scientific method. Over the past three centuries, medicine grew into a strictly physical discipline devoted to attending to scientifically measurable bodily pains and ills, while the mind and its disorders were placed in the care of an entirely separate profession whose inquiries into the nature of the mind and its ills were not taken particularly seriously by the wider medical and scientific community, since their methods of observation and study were subjective and often non-replicable, and their theories about the workings of the mind often lacked physical evidence (see 4.3).

To this day, the consequences of what became known as the Cartesian dualism of body and mind can be felt in the field of medicine and many, if not most, aspects of Western health care. Mehta describes it as a “reformatory and confining force” which allowed for significant progress in the study of the human body, but at the same time isolated the mind and trivialized or ignored its role in the individual illness experience.422 A great number of philosophers, sociologists, and medical professionals have developed new theories and approaches to heal the intolerable split between the mind and body that has dominated their professions, and Western society at large, for so long. During the second half of the 20th century, a conscious effort began to re-humanize traditional biomedicine and develop new conceptions of illness which account for the patient’s experience of being ill, as well as the external social circumstances (stress, powerlessness, financial worries, etc.) which may hasten or hamper their recovery. One such approach comes from the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who coined the term “lived-body” in 1945 in criticism of the predominant Cartesian model of the “object-body”: “The union of soul and body is not an amalgamation between two mutually exclusive external terms, subject and object, brought about by arbitrary degree. It is enacted at every instant in the movement of existence.”423 In direct criticism of Descartes, Merleau-Ponty adds: “True reflection presents me to myself not as an idle and inaccessible subjectivity, but as identical with my presence in the world and to others, as I am now realizing it: I am all that I see, I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical situation, but on the contrary, by being this body and this situation, and through them, all the rest.”424 Physician Jeffrey Gold uses the

422 Mehta 202.
424 Merleau-Ponty 452.
terms in the same sense when he states that the ill patient possesses the “lived-body,” while the doctor traditionally examines the Cartesian “object-body” to determine the illness. Arthur Kleinman’s influential work *The Illness Narratives* explores the myriad social and emotional factors which shape the individual patient’s reality of being ill. Kleinman pays special attention to these oft-neglected aspects in the context of chronic illness, which challenges traditional biomedicine and pushes the existing healthcare model to its limits since it places different strains on the patient and their loved ones compared to short-term illnesses. Similar efforts were made in the field of psychiatry to narrow the gulf to traditional biomedicine and study the human mind more effectively, free of the trappings of subjectivity, by turning to the biological sciences (particularly neurology and immunology). Notably, in 1977, the psychiatrist George Engel sought to reconcile the differences between psychiatry and biomedicine by developing a new perspective on health in general, known as the biopsychosocial model of health, which takes into account the complex web of factors which can affect an individual’s well-being. In recent decades, psychiatrists and mental illness advocacy groups alike have campaigned to rename mental illnesses as “brain diseases” in an effort to reduce common assumptions and misconceptions associated with the label, with mixed success.

Yet, despite all the efforts to reunite the mind and body, the mind and its ills remain different, special. Historical conceptions of the mind/soul retain a measure of their former influence even in contemporary Western society, in contemporary America. They leave their mark not only on the scientific terminology (beginning with the label of “mental illness” itself, a wording which implies a disorder which affects purely the Cartesian mind), on institutions (e.g. the existence of mental hospitals alongside general hospitals), and on complex systems (e.g. special budgets and insurance plans devoted to “mental health care”), but continue to play a major, if largely unreflected, role in lay conceptions of mental illness/madness. To think of the mind, or even the physical brain, as disordered, infirm or unsound is profoundly disquieting, given that it is held to be the center, or core of our intellect, the embodiment of the self, the keeper of our memories. In laypersons’ explanations of mental disorders and aberrant behavior, many of the above-mentioned perspectives of the mind and soul come into play, despite their

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1289841/>.

scientific inaccuracy, in order to make sense of phenomena that seem, at least according to popular lore, to lack sense and reason. Perhaps most importantly, these influences continue to survive because they possess something which modern scientific discourse lacks by design. Scientific language and vocabulary are quite deliberately leave little to no room for emotions, speculation, and interpretation; they are also frequently at odds with campfire stories, bedtime fairytales and Sunday school lessons, all of which shape most people’s lives long before they ever gain access to an academic textbook. As Watters says, contemporary scientific knowledge is not yet able to provide the powerful comfort- and meaning-making capabilities of other forms of discourse. For precisely this reason, it is necessary to examine lay understandings of madness/mental illness, which in turn influence much of the imagery and presentation of the topic in narratives of popular culture.

5.1.3. Lay Conceptions of Madness: Stigma and Folk Psychiatry

Madness fascinates. Whether it is the torment of Hamlet, the punishment of Nebuchadnezzar, or the struggles of Joan of Arc, the records of mad kings in the annals of history, or the knife-wielding figure stalking a sleepy suburbia on late-night television, portrayals of madness draw us in, glue our eyes to the page or the screen in abject horror and hair-raising excitement. Apart from fiction and tales from ages past, the topic also fills the pages of celebrity gossip columns in the form of starlets visiting “shrinks” and “rehab,” and flickers across the ticker during the evening news, inspiring pity and scorn, amusement and fright, confusion and speculation. Even outside the realms of fiction, history and news reporting, madness is ever in the backs of our minds – tucked away inside a mental drawer, a label to be applied to the outrageous or deviant behavior we witness in everyday life. This readiness to spot and categorize the “abnormal” is not, as a cynic might suspect, indicative of particular ignorance or cruelty per se, nor is it limited to spotting that which is mad, bad or dangerous to know. Rather, the human ability to make near-subconscious snap judgments about others based on superficial clues such as physical appearance, mannerisms, facial expression, etc., serves as the basis of daily social interaction. As Erving Goffman notes in his groundbreaking work *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*:

> The routines of social intercourse in established settings allow us to deal with anticipated others without special attention or thought. When a stranger comes into our presence, then, first appearances are likely to enable us to anticipate his category and attributes, his “social identity” — to use a term that is better than “social status” because personal
attributes such as “honesty” are involved, as well as structural ones, like “occupation.” We lean on these anticipations that we have, transforming them into normative expectations, into righteously presented demands.427

A similar phenomenon is recognized in the cognitive sciences under the term “folk psychology,” which refers to the innate human capacity to perceive and make sense of others’ behavior and mental state. When taken together, the human ability to recognize the psychological state of others and the human fascination with (mental) abnormality, particular ways in which laypersons attempt to make sense of madness/mental illness emerge. Social psychologist Nick Haslam refers to these sense-making methods as “folk psychiatry,” which, analogous to folk psychology, denotes the human ability or tendency to recognize and explain supposed mental dysfunction in others.428 In his 2003 article, he argues that laypersons have a rather nuanced but often poorly articulated understanding of psychological deviance, which draws on four broad sense-making mechanisms: pathologizing, moralizing, medicalizing and psychologizing.429 Pathologizing refers to the judgment of a behavior or experience as deviant (i.e. rare, incomprehensible, and seemingly without due cause), and the resulting desire to explain this deviance. Moralizing, as its name indicates, is the search for an explanatory framework for the perceived abnormality using the same means with which humans commonly evaluate everyday interactions. Unfortunately, so Haslam:

Acts are understood to derive from intentions […]. When the acts in question are evaluated negatively, as is almost invariably the case with psychiatric phenomena, this form of reason explanation views the actor as blameworthy and disgraced. Because the act is undesirable, actors are inferred to have undesirable reasons – dubious beliefs or unpleasant desires – or insufficient self-mastery to restrain their bad intentions.430

Goffman, in the context of stigma (see below), offers a similar explanation for negative interpretations of another person’s appearance, character or actions: According to him, people create “virtual social identities” for others based on their observations and assumptions, which differ in lesser or greater ways from the traits and abilities – the “actual social identity” – that the person being observed truly possesses. When someone fails to conform to the imagined construct by exhibiting a non-normative trait or

429 Haslam 623-629.
430 Haslam 626-627.
behavior, so Goffman, they become visibly different, and possibly, depending on the significance of this non-normative aspect of their person, discomfiting and undesirable. Haslam’s third method, medicalizing, likens or attributes the deviance to disease. The lay act of medicalizing does not necessarily fall in line with the scientific understanding of the disease, but rather describes a disease-based reductivism: If a particular condition has been shown to have a biological basis, for instance, Haslam argues that lay persons have the tendency to draw additional conclusions from this knowledge, i.e. that the disorder is universal or has specific symptoms which occur without fail. The final method, psychologizing, seeks to make sense of deviance by framing it as unintentional, subconscious, or as the product of the person’s upbringing and personality. This method does not explain a sociopathic person’s lack of empathy as an act of malice, or a compulsive hoarder’s inability to keep the house neat and clean as a result of laziness or lack of discipline, but rather looks to incidents in the person’s life, such as unstable family relationships or a traumatic loss, to account for their aberrant behavior. In addition, folk psychiatry relies on lay interpretations of psychiatric theories and other medical knowledge to form opinions or find the vocabulary to describe the behavior in question. Particularly Freudian theories of the structure of the mind, dreams and memories have penetrated popular consciousness to a startling degree, as evidenced by the incorporation of a multitude of terms drawn from the turn-of-the-century works of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung into everyday speech: Arrested development, anal-retentiveness, libido, Oedipal complex, oral fixation, projection, Freudian slips, and so on and so forth, readily avail themselves for the description of human behavior, even when the behavior in question is a mere quirk of personality. Although these theories are now considered outdated and methodologically questionable among medical professionals, bits and pieces of them live on, repurposed, in the vernacular, where they continue to color the understanding of madness/mental disorders.

The above-mentioned points already provide an inkling as to the complexity of folk psychiatry and its scope of influence. Contemporary American popular culture, in particular, is suffused with conflicting attitudes and explanations for madness/mental illness, ranging from the police consultants and officers in detective dramas debating whether a “disturbed” criminal’s actions are motivated by willful cruelty or an unhappy childhood (Criminal Minds, CSI, Law & Order), the stony psychiatrist who only

---

431 Goffman, Stigma 2.
432 Haslam 629.
433 Haslam 631.
speaks to authoritatively interpret the woes of their patient on the – often literal – couch (Analyze This, The Sopranos, Monk, Desperate Housewives), or the depiction of mad characters whose affliction is described as an immutable part of their very nature (commonly offered as a justification for a character’s crimes, for instance in The Silence of the Lambs or works within the horror genre), to name only a few examples. In short, folk psychiatric perceptions of madness/mental illness frequently form their own echo chamber, since they are accepted by many people and are affirmed or reinforced by the works of popular culture which they consume on a regular basis. This is not necessarily negative in and of itself; however, if overly simplistic or unfavorable explanations for madness/mental illness dominate, folk psychiatry can easily become an instrument of stigmatization.

“Stigma,” in its original ancient Greek meaning, refers to ritualistic marks placed upon people who were seen as undesirable – usually criminals – in order to identify them as such and warn others of coming in contact with them. The modern use of the term (particularly in the social sciences) remains remarkably close to the original usage, if on a purely metaphorical level. “Stigma” now refers to traits which cause an individual to be perceived as markedly different and thus to be avoided. Goffman distinguishes between three different kinds of stigma which serve as near-universal factors of exclusion and discrimination, namely physical deformities and disabilities, conditions perceived as indicative of poor character (e.g. mental illness, addiction, homosexuality, unemployment, etc.), and finally tribal stigma, which refers to traits attributed to membership in a particular group, such as ethnicity, nationality, and religious denomination. Interestingly, illness, impairment and disfigurement play a prominent role in two of these three categories, and a subtler, more insidious role in the third: There are numerous cases throughout history of certain ethnic or religious groups facing discrimination on account of their being “unclean” or “contagious.” Similarly, the concept of disease has frequently played a part in systemic oppression. By declaring a certain group of people ill – particularly mentally ill – undesirable behaviors can be pathologized and dismissed. Another point of interest is that although Goffman places mental disorders in the category of traits which are seen as a sign of moral failure or corruption, most stigmatizing representations of the subject in popular culture include aspects from all three types of stigma. Mad/mentally ill characters are often portrayed as physically different (e.g. with twisted facial features, an unnatural gait

434 Goffman, Stigma 9.
435 Goffman, Stigma 16.
or visible tics), as being of questionable moral character (e.g. they are shown to be violent, criminal, or addicted to drugs), and are often perceived as a separate group, different from “normal” humans.437

Bruce Link and Jo Phelan opt to describe stigma not from the perspective of traits, as Goffman does, but rather from acts of power which result in the discrediting of an individual, namely labeling, stereotyping, othering, and discrimination.438 In the context of madness/mental illness, one of the most common labels is the distinction between “sane” and “insane,” one of which is valued higher than the other. The devalued label, “insane,” is associated with negative characteristics that emphasize its undesirability – unpredictability, violence, low intelligence or weakness, to name only a few – which naturally widens the gulf between those deemed “sane” and “insane.” Those who are deemed “insane” become the Other, and are seen as dangerous, alien or incomprehensible. Of course, since those who are labeled “insane” have already been assigned negative characteristics, this precludes efforts of understanding and maintaining contact with them. Link and Phelan describe the process as a kind of self-perpetuating mechanism, as “the linking of labels to undesirable attributes […] become[s] the rationale for believing that negatively labeled persons are fundamentally different […]. At the same time, when labeled persons are believed to be distinctly different, stereotyping can be smoothly accomplished because there is little harm in attributing all manner of bad characteristics to ‘them’.”439 This opens the door to discrimination, harassment and even mistreatment – in the most extreme case, the Other is seen as inhuman or subhuman. In the case of madness/mental illness, people labeled as “insane” not only experience social isolation and struggle to find appropriate care, but shoulder additional burdens in the form of housing difficulties, unemployment, or even threats to their personhood (e.g. involuntary commitment or forced sterilization).

Catherine Campbell and Harriet Deacon choose to describe stigma via the differences in power that influence which groups of people and which particular traits are stigmatized in a given society or culture. Campbell and Deacon draw special attention to what they refer to as “layered stigma,”440 namely

---

437 This is not to say that racial and cultural biases have not played or do not continue to play an uncomfortable role in who is likely pronounced “mad,” diagnosed with a mental disorder or involuntarily committed/jailed on grounds of a mental disorder. Cf. Nancy L. Sohler and Evelyn J. Bromet, “Does Racial Bias Influence Psychiatric Diagnoses Assigned at First Hospitalization?” Social Psychiatry & Psychiatric Epidemiology 38 (2003): 463-472.


439 Link and Phelan 370.

the overlapping and amplification of stigmatization when individuals of a stigmatized group also happen
to belong to other marginalized groups: In the US, in particular, ethnicity and income play a potent role in
the stigmatization a person with mental illness is likely to experience: The 2001 supplement to the 1999
Surgeon General’s report examines the situation of racial and ethnic minorities with regard to mental
health and mental health care, concluding that minorities have limited access to mental health service
compared to white people, and are less likely to receive appropriate care, which is likely to be “poor in
quality.” In addition, Campbell and Deacon call attention to the fact that governmental, religious,
research and other institutional systems may cause particular conditions or traits to be scrutinized more
harshly, for example via overzealous health campaigns or by promoting particular ideologies. This does
not necessarily imply intent of marginalization or politics of exclusion: One of the most well-intentioned
and dedicated awareness campaigns to reduce the stigma of mental illness in the United States has only
recently been shown to have unintended stigmatizing effects of its own: Over the past five decades,
influential advocacy groups like the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) promoted the reframing
of mental illness as a “brain disease” in an effort to reduce the prevalence of (unscientific) folk psychiatric
beliefs. Proponents of the “brain disease” narrative hoped that if mental illnesses were to be accepted as
just another strain of bodily ailment, sufferers would no longer be exposed to stigmatization based on
unscientific explanations. Yet a study conducted by Sheila Mehta and Amerigo Farina in 1997 found that
although this approach lessened the blame placed on people diagnosed with mental illness, it did not
significantly improve acceptance of people with mental illness and might, in fact, lead to harsher treatment
based on their supposed biological difference. Further research has since backed these findings; Phelan,
for instance, discovered evidence that the “brain disease” explanation extends the stigma further to
include the patient’s relatives, who are presumed to share the same biological “defect,” and increases the
social isolation of sufferers. Corrigan and Watson claim that this attempt to foster tolerance may
promote a view of people with mental illness as incompetent, helpless or infantile since they cannot help
their genetic predisposition. This creates the risk of inspiring a so-called “benevolence stigma” which

441 US Department of Health and Human Services, “Mental Health: Culture, Race, and Ethnicity: A Supplement to Mental
442 Cf. Sheila Mehta and Amerigo Farina, “Is Being ‘Sick’ Really Better? Effect of the Disease View of Mental Disorder on
443 Jo C. Phelan, “Geneticization of Deviant Behavior and Consequences for Stigma: The Case of Mental Illness,” Journal of
entails the idea that “people with mental illness […] need to be controlled by a parental figure.”

What this suggests is that there may not be a “correct” way to view mental illness, nor a “proper” way to portray madness in works of fiction. After all, the human drive to make sense of the strange, the deviant, the unusual, the inexplicable is not governed by rational processes and scientific knowledge alone, but is powered by a great number of what may well be regarded as irrational impulses – fears, hopes, beliefs, compassion, the desire to belong, to name only a few. However, it is precisely this lack of a “right” approach that makes the close examination of the stories told about madness/mental illness in a particular cultural context – in this case, the US-American cultural context – so very crucial. The depictions of madness/mental illness in American fiction are deeply influenced by American folk psychiatry, which in turn draws from a veritable treasure trove (or Pandora’s Box?) of historical developments, religious tenets, moral maxims, quests for knowledge, and yet more narratives and stories. By developing an awareness of these influences, it becomes possible to understand why certain stories of madness continue to be told in American popular culture – those of the deranged serial killer, the institutionalized misfit, the neurotic young hip urban professional reclining on the infamous couch. Although the analysis of their inaccuracies and the criticism of their influence on Americans’ perceptions of real people with mental illness are, without a doubt, vital for the reduction of stigma and the fostering of tolerance, it does not sufficiently describe the pull which these stories continue to exert – against, it would seem, all reason. Most Americans have, at one point, settled down with a bowl of popcorn to read, watch or play just one such story. It is high time to examine why.

5.2. The Price of a Sound Mind: Mental Health Care in America

Madness frightens and fascinates for many reasons. Chief among them are associations with darkness, unreason, incomprehensibility, taboo, wildness and primordiality, as Michel Foucault explains in *Madness and Civilization*. However, they alone are not responsible for the influx of stories of madness which have come to dominate popular media in post-millennial America. While madness is a staple of certain genres like medical dramas, where patients with psychiatric disorders routinely become the focus of an episode, or in horror and crime fiction, which have a preference for mad or “disturbed” stalkers, serial killers and


445 Cf. Foucault.
other criminals that can be traced as far back as the writings of Edgar Allan Poe, more and more
protagonists (on television and elsewhere) are either diagnosed with a mental illness or characterized in
such a way as to highlight some form of mental “abnormality,” or madness. Whether it is Carrie
Mathison’s struggle with bipolar disorder in the political thriller series Homeland (2011-pres), Hannah
Horvath’s obsessive-compulsive tendencies in the comedy-drama series Girls (2012-present), Monk’s
private investigator Adrian Monk, whose various neuroses and phobias are as much a help as they are a
hindrance to his ability to solve crimes (2002-2009), or the emotionally stunted and extremely socially
inept Sheldon Cooper in the sitcom The Big Bang Theory (2007-present), popular media are clearly
responding to (and perhaps also partially creating) a certain cultural vibe, namely a preoccupation with
mental health and health care which concerns and affects millions of Americans. This preoccupation and
its root causes form a part of the cultural “background radiation” which affects how stories of madness –
even those not produced in America or tailored to the American context (see 2.2.3.) – are received by an
American mass audience, i.e. whether they are dismissed and forgotten about, discussed, dissected,
criticized and/or used as points of identification.

The current awareness of real-life mental health issues and their depiction in works of popular
culture can in large part be attributed to the overall health care crisis grown to its current proportions over
the course of decades. In fact, a cynic might claim that in 2015, reports on the ailing US-American health
care system with its byzantine regulations, convoluted structures, unfathomable internal conflicts and
exorbitant costs hardly qualify as news anymore. An air of cynicism surrounds not only the media
coverage of the subject, but permeates even academic papers and expert analyses. Thomas Bodenheimer
and Kevin Grumbach describe it as the “least universal, most costly health care system in the
industrialized world,”446 while the economist Henry Aaron scathingly refers to it as “[…] an administrative
monstrosity, a truly bizarre mélange of thousands of payers with payment systems that differ for no
socially beneficial reason, as well as staggeringly complex public systems with mind-boggling administered
prices and other rules expressing distinctions that can only be regarded as weird.”447 The legal labyrinth
created by private insurance conglomerates, the extreme costliness of even routine examinations, surgeries

Hill, 2012) 2.

447 Henry J. Aaron, “The Cost of Health Care Administration in the United States and Canada – Questionable Answers to a
and prescription medication, as well as the high number of uninsured Americans are all issues which are
well-documented in the fields of sociology, political science, law and medicine. According to a 2012
estimate by the US Census Bureau, around 48 million Americans (around 15.4 percent) are currently
uninsured, many of them from lower income households. To make matters worse, a 2007 study
conducted by researchers from Harvard Medical School, Harvard Law School and Ohio State University
found that 62.1 percent of all personal bankruptcies in the US had medical causes – primarily high medical
bills – despite the fact that around three quarters of the debtors had health insurance. More recent
reports show that the situation has not changed for the better; although the number of citizens covered by
governmental health insurance plans (Medicare and Medicaid) has increased by a margin (from 99.5
million in 2011 to 101.5 million in 2012), roughly 75 million Americans are either struggling to pay their
medical bills or are working to pay off an already existing medical debt.

Apart from the high personal and financial cost on an individual level, the overly complex and
largely privatized health care system also creates a mounting strain on America’s national budget and
expenditures. The current headlines regarding the health care crisis adopt a discomfiting familiarity when
compared against findings from previous decades; for instance, Arnold Relman, professor of medicine
and social medicine at Harvard Medical School, opens a publication on the financial conflicts of interest
among American physicians by writing: “Medical care in America has become dangerously expensive.
Consuming more than $800 billion in 1992 and growing at a compound rate of about 10% per year,
medical costs now thwart efforts to reduce the deficit and threaten the viability of our economy.” This
ominous prognosis dates back to 1993, a period of time when the United States was enjoying

---

451 DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith 22.
unprecedented economic growth and stability. The situation in the new millennium could not be more different from this period of fiscal optimism, with the country still laboring under the aftereffects of the real estate collapse and the resulting global financial crisis of 2008, the long-term consequences of 9/11, as well as two costly war efforts which continue to affect many Americans on a personal, financial and medical level. As of 2013 (the latest data available), the national health care expenditures are estimated to have risen to around $3 trillion, turning health-related ideologies and problems – be they about insurance, medical research, ethical issues, or the dwindling federal funding for direly necessary facilities (psychiatric wards in particular) – into fiercely divisive political standoffs.

Given the overwhelming pressure of the numbers, it is not too surprising that the areas of health care which are affected the most by the multitude of administrative and financial stresses are also areas which have traditionally been invisible, i.e. under-represented, under-funded, and/or cloaked in a mantle of silence, such as support for people with disabilities, women’s reproductive health, pre- and post-natal care, and, of course, mental health care. Among these areas, mental health care is easily the most vulnerable due to its low profitability and stigma: In a 2011 report on the reduction of state spending on mental health care services, NAMI documents the devastating budget cuts in the years 2009-2011 in a state-by-state tally. Overall, according to the report, more than $1.6 billion were cut from state budgets for mental health services in the period of those three years, a trend which advocacy groups and psychiatric organizations expect to continue in the foreseeable future. The closure and cut-backs of existing facilities and programs to aid people in need of psychiatric assistance are compounded by a general shortage of psychiatrists, both private and state-employed:


The above graphical representation from a 2009 study by Kathleen Thomas et al. on the shortage of mental health professionals in the US presents a dramatic picture, as more than three quarters (77 percent) of all 3,140 US counties are found to be grappling with a “severe shortage of mental health prescribers or non-prescribers,” a number which is unlikely to have changed for the better in recent years. According to Thomas et al., rural areas and counties with lower-income populations are particularly affected by this shortage; the counties with the most severe shortages on mental health care providers, rendered in the darkest shade of gray on the map, are concentrated in the Mid- and Northwest, as well as parts of the Southern US (particularly in Arkansas and Texas). Overall, approximately 89 million Americans are left without access to basic mental health care. These systemic inequalities and impasses are not merely due to the economic and political crises of the past ten years; rather, they are the unintended – and long-ignored – side effect of a series of legal and structural reforms which sought to fundamentally reorganize American mental health care in the second half of the 20th century.

5.2.1. From Asylums…

For more than 150 years, the institution of the so-called lunatic asylum formed the core of mental health care in America. Prior to the asylum, which rose to prominence in the 19th century, persons with mental illness had little hope of finding treatment, since the prevalent medical understanding saw afflictions of the mind as untreatable, and sufferers were popularly thought to be beast-like, possessed by demons, practitioners of witchcraft, or receiving divine punishment for some unfathomable transgression. These perspectives began to change during the late 18th century, as the spread of Enlightenment conceptions of the mind and its ideals of rationality, empiricism, self-improvement and scientific methodology caused the supernatural explanations for madness to gradually lose some of their potency. Medical practitioners such as Benjamin Rush (1746-1813), who is frequently referred to as the Father of American Psychiatry for his pioneering contributions — among them the publication of *Medical Inquiries and Observations upon Diseases of the Mind* in 1812, the first comprehensive American textbook on the subject of “lunacy” — began to classify different conditions according to their symptoms and to experiment with possible treatments based on more or less far-fetched theories such as brain lesions, obstructions of blood flow, etc., and rejected the notion of incarcerating patients in judicial or quasi-judicial institutions like jails and poorhouses.

In addition, the Second Great Awakening during the late 18th and early 19th centuries led to the birth of a new social consciousness among the American people, inspired by the reinterpretation of the Christian teachings spread by tireless evangelists from several different denominations. Among other things, the new Christian spirituality broke with Puritan fatalism and rejected the idea of the total depravity of humankind by emphasizing self-improvement, free will, and the idea of a benevolent God. As Gerald Grob notes, this new American spirituality had a significant effect on social consciousness and responsibility:

---


When the concept of the free individual was fused with the millennial vision of a perfected society, evangelical Protestantism was transformed into an active social force seeking the abolition of the restraints that bound individuals. [...] The result was a generalized faith that institutions could be improved and that individuals could be perfected.\textsuperscript{461}

What followed was an unprecedented period of activism and drive towards societal change, most notably the women’s rights and abolitionist movements. One of the most prominent advocates for the mentally ill was the educator and reformer Dorothea Lynde Dix (1802-1887), who embarked on a journey across the United States in 1842, visiting jails, almshouses and private residences to establish a picture of the situation of the mentally ill. In her report to the government of Massachusetts, Dix arrives at the conclusion that “[t]he use of cages [is] all but universal; hardly a town but can refer to some not distant period of using them; chains are less common; negligences frequent; willful abuse less frequent than sufferings proceeding from ignorance, or want of consideration,”\textsuperscript{462} and argues that the state should feel morally obliged to become involved in the provision of adequate care since penitentiaries and almshouses had never been intended to house the insane and do nothing to improve their condition. Dix’s tireless efforts alone resulted in the creation of over thirty mental hospitals all across the United States, which were partly subsidized by the government and partly supported by donations from affluent members of the emerging upper class.\textsuperscript{463}

The American lunatic asylum initially was an extremely idealistic venture meant to heal and reintegrate the mentally ill into their communities as productive members of society. To this end, the asylum had to be specifically constructed and staffed with trained personnel mindful of the principles of “moral treatment.” The layout and architecture of the asylum, it was believed, played a significant role in the recovery process, providing the patient with fresh air and the calming influence of nature, a balanced diet and exercise, as well as meaningful occupations and entertainment such as gardening, woodwork, or card games, all of which were meant to distract patients from falling back into old thought and behavioral

\textsuperscript{461} Grob 30.


\textsuperscript{463} Grob 30, 47.
patterns.\textsuperscript{464} Despite these high standards, the asylum system was not conducive to patient emancipation. The institution, as well as the field of psychiatry emerging within its walls, was steeped in patriarchal notions, as prominent feminist critics and scholars have observed.\textsuperscript{465} This was not merely due to the fact that the study of medicine had remained an exclusively male domain for centuries – women did not gain access to medical education until the late 1800s – but also originated from the explicit setup of the asylum as a family unit, managed by a knowledgeable, authoritarian father figure (the superintendent/psychiatrist) and populated by a slew of children in need of instruction and guidance (the patients).\textsuperscript{466} This constellation of power opened the system up for malpractice (e.g. involuntary institutionalization) and gave rise to considerable diagnostic bias, particularly towards women and ethnic minorities.

Given these ideological issues and their consequences, one might be tempted to assume that the asylum system began its descent into ruin once this particular understanding of madness/mental illness was scientifically proven to be false and replaced by a more enlightened view. However, rather than due to dubious rhetoric, the collapse was triggered by the crushing pressure of the numbers. The efforts of activists and physicians to have mental patients treated in special hospitals instead of confined to prisons or basements were entirely too successful, as the asylum came to be regarded as the only viable way to treat insanity. Within only a few decades, the conceptually small and familial asylums became flooded with existing patients formerly detained in corrective facilities, new patients whose families were unable or unwilling to nurse them, patients suffering from infectious diseases with psychiatric symptoms (e.g. neurosyphilis),\textsuperscript{467} traumatized or severely wounded veterans of the American Civil War (1861-1865), as well as persons who did not qualify as patients at all according to 21st-century standards, but who were nevertheless institutionalized for violations of certain social norms – a procedure which was characterized by its relative ease and informality.\textsuperscript{468} Under this influx of actual and alleged patients, lunatic asylums were


\textsuperscript{466} Grob 66.

\textsuperscript{467} Shorter 54.

\textsuperscript{468} Women, children and minorities were particularly at risk of such malpractice, since state legislature often did not afford them the right to a court hearing before commitment as it did with their husbands and fathers. Cf. Jennifer Rebecca Levison, “Elizabeth Parsons Ware Packard: An Advocate for Cultural, Religious, and Legal Change,” \textit{Alabama Law Review} 54.3 (2003): 988-1077.
soon filled past their capacity. Shorter estimates that annual admissions to a regular American asylum rose from 31 patients in 1820 to 182 in 1870, while the average number of patients housed in an asylum leapt from 57 to 473 in the same span of time.\(^\text{469}\) Furthermore, the number of hospital staff, especially doctors, remained largely unchanged, which not seldom led to situations in which as few as four physicians were in charge of more than 1,200 patients.\(^\text{470}\) With the steadily rising flood of patients came severe financial problems, since facilities of this size and scope could no longer be maintained by philanthropic donations, and support from local governments was usually sporadic and below the actual cost of patient care. This led facilities to fall into disrepair and standards of employment to slip – according to Grob, it became par for the course to employ convicted criminals as attendants and/or to turn a blind eye on hazardous or criminal behavior among the staff, such as alcoholism, willful neglect, and physical or sexual abuse of patients.\(^\text{471}\)

By the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, the asylum had at last reached its nadir – overcrowding had become endemic, highly unsanitary conditions favored the outbreak of typhoid fever, tuberculosis and other infectious diseases, malnutrition was common, restraints and isolation chambers – once condemned by psychiatrists and activists – found widespread use, and patient neglect or outright abuse was all too common. These conditions were not at all improved by the spread of the eugenics movement, whose proponents (among them biologists such as Charles Davenport and physicians like John Harvey Kellogg) advocated for the exclusion or outright extermination of the “genetically unfit” from the human gene pool. Opinions on which groups of people counted as “genetically unfit” or “dysgenic” and how they should be dealt with varied among eugenics advocates depending on their personal views and political agenda, but most agreed that “the inmates of the lunatic, idiot, and pauper asylums, the prisoners, the patients in hospitals, the sufferers at home, the crippled, and the congenitally blind”\(^\text{472}\) should be kept from passing on their genes. As a result, asylums across America became pioneering institutions for practices like forced chemical and surgical sterilization, practices which were even ruled constitutional by the Supreme Court in 1927, making the United States the first country in the world to legally endorse eugenic practices. Several European countries like Denmark, Sweden, Belgium, and most infamously

\(^{469}\) Shorter 46.

\(^{470}\) Shorter 46.

\(^{471}\) Grob 50, 96.

Germany followed suit by passing similar laws. More than a simple method of keeping society free of undesirables, sterilization was soon advertised as a therapeutic method by asylum physicians, who claimed that it could improve patients’ tempers. Women, in particular, were said to benefit from the procedure since they would no longer have to fear the rigors of childbirth and motherhood.\textsuperscript{473} The influence of eugenics and the general disregard towards or outright disdain for the (chronically) ill and disabled which it inspired is also reflected in the use of asylum patients as guinea pigs in a number of non-consensual and inhumane medical experiments, some of which were conducted as late as the 1960s and 1970s and which included the deliberate infection of patients with contagious diseases, the performance of unnecessary high-risk or altogether untested surgical procedures, as well as injection with radioactive isotopes and other poisons in order to study their effects.\textsuperscript{474} In short, the idealistic institution which had been conceived as a healthy, humane alternative to the incarceration of the mentally ill in prisons, workhouses or private basements became a kind of prison itself, allowing for the proliferation of the very acts of cruelty it had originally been intended to prevent.

5.2.2. Towards Deinstitutionalization...

In the wake of World War II, as reports of the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany shocked the world, the attention of the American public was drawn to the terrible conditions and unethical treatments within the walls of their own institutions. Influential scholars and even psychiatrists themselves began to speak out against the practices of their profession and the legislature which supported or tacitly enabled them. Although the asylum and its methods had been met with skepticism at various times since their inception, true to the spirit of the Civil Rights era, this marked the first time that criticism of psychiatry came to resemble a national and even international movement. Perhaps unfairly referred to as “anti-psychiatry,” the aim of the movement was to question the core tenets of psychiatry and its practices. It was during this period that Michel Foucault wrote his influential treatise \textit{Madness and Civilization} (1961), in which he argues that psychiatry and its related institutions primarily serve as mechanisms of social control, as a means of


discrediting social deviants and separating them from the rest of society. Foucault views the asylum as much more than a simple containment facility for the ill, stating that its structure and purpose served those deemed sane more than those deemed mad: “The asylum no longer punished the madman’s guilt, but it did more, it organized that guilt; it organized it for the madman as a consciousness for himself, and as a non-reciprocal relation to the keeper; it organized it for the man of reason as an awareness of the Other, a therapeutic intervention in the madman’s existence.”\textsuperscript{475} Even the rise of psychoanalysis, so Foucault, only furthered this pattern of surveillance and judgment by “doubling the absolute observation of the watcher with the endless monologue of the person watched – thus preserving the old asylum structure of non-reciprocal observation but balancing it, in a nonsymmetrical reciprocity, by the new structure of language without response.”\textsuperscript{476} Likewise in 1961, Erving Goffman published his essay collection \textit{Asylums}, in which he examines insane asylums as a type of “total institution” where “a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.”\textsuperscript{477} Asylums, so Goffman, belong to a category of total institution reserved to “care for persons \textit{felt} to be incapable of looking after themselves and a threat to the community, albeit an unintended one […]”.\textsuperscript{478} Thomas Szasz, himself a psychiatrist, also published his controversial book \textit{The Myth of Mental Illness} in the same year (based on his article of the same title), proposing that, apart from a small number of scientifically recognized brain diseases, most so-called mental illnesses are the result of a medicalization of life problems, and that viewing them as medical problems actually discourages personal and social responsibility.\textsuperscript{479} In subsequent publications, he also severely criticizes asylums and mental hospitals, describing them as places where “thousands of individuals were forcibly incarcerated […], often for life.”\textsuperscript{480}

Moreover, the development of psychotropic medication starting in the mid-1950s brought about unprecedented successes in the treatment of even severe mental disorders (e.g. schizophrenia) which had previously been considered incurable. These initial successes resulted in a race among pharmaceutical laboratories to discover more miracle drugs, eventually leading to the wide array of medications available

---

\textsuperscript{473} Foucault 247.
\textsuperscript{474} Foucault 250-251.
\textsuperscript{475} Erving Goffman, \textit{Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates} (Garden City: Anchor, 1961) xxi.
\textsuperscript{476} Goffman, \textit{Asylums} 4. Emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{477} Szasz, “The Myth of Mental Illness” 115.
today to treat or manage the symptoms of various mental conditions (e.g. tranquilizers, antipsychotics, stimulants, etc.). The post-war economic boom and the rise of consumerism led pharmaceutical companies to employ aggressive marketing strategies in order to sell their drugs – including the newly developed psychotropics. In his book about the rise of psychotropic medication in America, David Herzberg recounts:

To sell this dizzying new psychotropic cornucopia, drug marketers flooded physicians’ offices with armies of detail men, avalanches of direct mail appeals, and a deluge of free gifts, free samples, and free trade journals. One company provided pillows embroidered with the name and catch-phrase of their mild relaxant. Another enticed physicians with a catalogue of consumer goods purchasable through “bonus points” collected by frequent prescribers. Meanwhile, medical journals were awash with tens or even hundreds of pages of slick advertisements pushing trade-named drugs with shameless enthusiasm and salescraft.481

These aggressive advertising campaigns contributed – somewhat questionably – to a normalization of certain types of mental illness by rebranding particular symptoms as indicators of “the burden of success” which the affluent American middle class was claimed to bear. Among other “ailments,” advertisements for psychotropic drugs claimed to alleviate “the blues,” fatigue, social anxiety, and insomnia, alongside more dubious benefits such as curing skin problems, stomach aches, frigidity in women, and even juvenile delinquency.482 As evidenced by euphemistic nicknames like “mother’s little helper,” a conscious effort was made to dissociate the consumption of psychotropic drugs from the use of illegal street drugs by presenting them as status symbols or badges of honor and by repeatedly assuring consumers that their effects were entirely benign.483 In short, these wildly successful advertising campaigns contributed to a certain climate in which prescription medicine came to be regarded as a shortcut to mental and emotional well-being.

The publicity surrounding psychotropic medication, combined with the aforementioned criticism of the existing psychiatric institutions, initiated what became known as the deinstitutionalization movement. Deinstitutionalization, as its name indicates, rejects the confinement of patients to centralized asylums which act as holding pens, and instead emphasizes the patients’ need for social integration and self-determination. Several governmental reforms such as the Community Mental Health Act of 1963 and

482 Herzberg 43.
483 Herzberg 45.
the establishment of Medicaid in 1965 initiated the process of deinstitutionalization on a national scale. In fact, the Community Mental Health Act is generally viewed as the death knell of the insane asylum, since it initiated the nationwide closure of state hospitals, which were to be replaced by federally funded Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs) that would provide patients with treatment and various other types of help (e.g. assisted living) while they remained at home. Segments of the asylum population were slowly transferred to more appropriate care facilities, e.g. nursing homes for elderly patients, which were to be supported through federal grants.

The period from the 1960s to the 1980s was marked by a radical shift from inpatient to outpatient care, as asylums continued to close their doors and discharge thousands of patients who were to be supported CMHCs from then on. The asylums that remained operational began to serve as short-term emergency facilities for patients who required acute care and supervision (e.g. suicidal persons). According to Chris Koyanagi, “[by] 1977, there were 650 community mental health centers covering 43 percent of the population and serving 1.9 million individuals a year.” Although the goal was to allow patients to lead self-determined lives within their respective communities, Koyanagi’s data hints at the structural weaknesses of this new model of mental health care, which relied on less than a thousand institutions to provide care for hundreds of thousands of patients, and which remained out of reach for the majority of Americans in rural or impoverished areas. Grob observes that the deinstitutionalization process was further hampered by poor planning and coordination on the state and federal levels, confusing or contradictory regulations, and a lack of awareness of the diverse needs of the patients.

Although it became clear fairly early on (by the mid-1970s) that the deinstitutionalization efforts were creating nearly as many problems as they solved and that the emerging administrative chaos and service shortages would have to be alleviated as quickly as possible, most attempts at reform became lost in a tangle of divergent political ideologies, the interference of various interest groups and industrial lobbies, or periods of economic decline. For example, the Mental Health Systems Act signed by President Jimmy Carter in 1980, one of the earliest large-scale endeavors to address the emerging weaknesses of the deinstitutionalization process, was completely reversed before it could ever take effect. The Act, which was intended to grant

---

484 Chris Koyanagi, “Learning from History: Deinstitutionalization of People with Mental Illness as Precursor to Long-Term Care Reform,” NAMI, Aug. 2007, 31 Aug. 2017

<http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=About_the_Issue&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&Cont entID=137545>.

485 Grob 300.
more funding to the CMCHs and improve the coordination between different state programs, was repealed only one year later when Ronald Reagan assumed office, since the new administration favored an approach which left social welfare concerns up to the individual states and at the same time encouraged the funding of more profitable economic sectors. This and other failed reform efforts, such as the more generally inclined Clinton Health Security Act of 1993, left the difficulties arising from deinstitutionalization largely unaddressed. As Paul Starr notes on American health care reform efforts in general, they have the unfortunate tendency to “vanish like a mirage,” which has the most dire consequences for sectors which already occupy a marginal position in the ailing American health care system.

5.2.3. ...to an Inconsistent System and Its Consequences

The effects of deinstitutionalization continue to be felt even more than fifty years after the first move to abolish the equally flawed (albeit in different ways) asylum system. Although deinstitutionalization, at its core, was intended to grant patients more rights and freedom in health care decisions, to allow them to live as integrated members of their communities and to create different, more cost-effective and ultimately more humane treatment regimens, the reality looked and still looks different. The 2009 “Grading the States” report by NAMI reveals that the most serious issues continue to persist, including “penny-wise, pound-foolish” financing decisions, a lack of public health insurance plans that cover mental health care expenses, a shortage of housing facilities for people with serious mental disorders, and a continued diversion of patients to substitute facilities (emergency rooms, primary care physicians, homeless shelters and jails) which are ill-equipped to provide adequate care. The mass closure of public asylums and other types of inpatient mental hospitals means that an increasingly smaller number of beds is available for people in need of immediate psychiatric assistance (e.g. suicidal persons). Studies conducted by the WHO and independent mental health advocacy groups show that the number of available beds dwindled from

---

488 For a detailed breakdown of the current difficulties in the provision of adequate mental health care in America, see Paul S. Applebaum, “The ‘Quiet’ Crisis in Mental Health Services,” *Health Affairs* 22.5 (2003): 110-116.  
489 National Alliance on Mental Illness, “Grading the States 2009.”
over 400,000 in 1960\textsuperscript{490} to only a little more than 61,000 in 2011,\textsuperscript{491} which not only forces inadequately equipped and financially overburdened emergency rooms and similarly ill-prepared care providers to handle the influx of patients, but drastically reduces the amount of time patients can stay in such facilities. As Michael Shally-Jensen observes: “Even hospitals with dedicated mental health wings commonly hold patients only long enough to provide a brief evaluation and a course of medication. Long-term planning and treatment are thus supplanted by ad hoc decisions and temporary fixes, resulting in a mixed form of care […]”\textsuperscript{492} Often, patients in need of consistent care are irregularly admitted, discharged and readmitted in a continuous cycle, which has become known as the “revolving door” phenomenon. Unfortunately, this fragmented type of care is not conducive to conditions which are chronic, frequently require long-term professional assistance, delicately balanced medication and a solid system of support in order to stabilize. In addition, despite the recent improvements in the provision of health care thanks to the 2010 Affordable Care Act (nicknamed “Obamacare”) – which, among other things, has widened the scope and eligibility of the national insurance programs Medicare and Medicaid – gaps in these programs continue to persist. For instance, eligibility is still restricted by a number of factors (such as the length of time a person has been uninsured due to unemployment) which cut off people with mental disorders from medication and other services that they direly need unless their circumstances just so happen to coincide with these strict requirements.\textsuperscript{493}

As a result of inconsistent, unaffordable or unavailable treatment, many persons with mental disorders are unable to support themselves financially, which contributes to an extremely high rate of homelessness, substance abuse and incarceration. In fact, the involvement of the criminal justice system in the care (in the widest sense) of persons with mental disorders has become substantial. A 2006 study conducted by the Department of Justice reveals that a disproportionate number of inmates in state prisons


\textsuperscript{492}Michael Shally-Jensen, Mental Health Care Issues in America: An Encyclopedia (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2013) xviii.

\textsuperscript{493}National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), “State Mental Health Cuts.”
— roughly one quarter — had a history of mental health problems before their arrest. Another report issued by the Council of State Governments Justice Center notes that “[r]esearch strongly suggests that people with mental illnesses are overrepresented in probation and parole populations at estimated rates ranging from two to four times the general population” and that many of these individuals have substance abuse problems (alcohol or illegal street drugs) related to their frequently untreated disorders. In fact, the Cook County Jail in Illinois, the largest single-site correctional facility in the country, has been forced to make drastic changes to its procedures and the training of its staff in order to cope with the thousands of inmates with mental health problems — many of whom are incarcerated for nonviolent crimes of survival, such as the theft of food or squatting. Not only did the jail choose to appoint a clinical psychologist as warden in 2015, but the officers and staff on duty now receive rigorous training in the recognition and treatment of mental illness, inmates are screened for histories of mental illness in order to offer appropriate care and psychiatric therapy, and are even issued a modest supply of prescription medication for their diagnosed condition upon their release in order to prevent immediate relapses.

Another effect of the lack of emergency services for people experiencing a psychiatric crisis is that the police have been forced into the position of first responders in cases of suicide threats, erratic behavior or public disturbances by persons with mental disorders. That a combination of untrained, armed responders on the one hand and extraordinarily distressed or impaired people on the other hand frequently results in a violent or even deadly outcome is sadly all too common. Although there exist no national statistics to date, a 2013 report by the Treatment Advocacy Center and the National Sheriffs’ Association estimates that “at least half the people shot and killed by police each year in [America] have mental health problems,” and concludes that “[t]he transfer of responsibility for persons with mental


illness from mental health professionals to law enforcement officers is both illogical and unfair and harms both the patients and the officers.\footnote{498} Several smaller, localized investigations yield similar findings. An inquiry by the Department of Justice into the use of excessive force by the Cleveland Division of Police specifically highlights a pattern of unnecessarily harsh or even deadly responses against “persons who are mentally ill or in crisis, including in cases where the officers were called exclusively for a welfare check.”\footnote{499} The report further states that although most officers justify their use of force by claiming that the victim(s) posed a threat, they often fail to explain the threat in concrete terms and seem to act on baseless fears.\footnote{500} These and other findings are indicators of the depth of the systemic problems in caring for persons with mental disorders in America: Not only is it incredibly difficult to find (and pay for) appropriate treatment, but the unmet needs of those in crisis are shifted towards other administrative bodies which were never designed to substitute for medical services.

Given this laundry list of largely negative developments in the care and social integration of people with mental disorders, one might be tempted to conclude that the increasing presence of madness in narratives of popular culture is largely or entirely due to fear. After all, the dismal care options and great financial strain of treatment present a potential threat to the lives and livelihood of persons suffering from mental health problems, pushing them to the fringes of American society. In addition, the high visibility of persons with mental illness due to homelessness, drug abuse and encounters with the criminal justice system allow for the proliferation of false assumptions and negative stereotypes, e.g. the idea that mental health problems imply a propensity for violent or criminal behavior, or the belief that sufferers should be locked away rather than be allowed to cause problems (whatever these problems may or may not be) within the community.\footnote{501} However, deinstitutionalization has also had its positive effects. Although the increased social visibility of mental disorders is a source of anxiety for many Americans, it has created a social climate in which persons with mental disorders and their struggles are not so easily ignored. Most


\footnote{500} US Department of Justice and US Attorney’s Office 29.

importantly, it has allowed patients to achieve a greater degree of emancipation and to take a more active role in their treatment than would have been possible under the rigidly hierarchical and frequently patronizing asylum system. Many of America’s most prominent support networks, outreach programs and advocacy groups for people with mental disorders arose out of the deinstitutionalization movement (such as NAMI), founded by patients, former patients or family members in order to combat stigma, lobby for patient rights and generally lend aid to sufferers in danger of falling through the cracks of the fragmented American mental health care system. A national survey conducted in 2002 found there to be 7,467 support groups, self-help organizations and consumer-operated service programs for mental disorders in the United States, a number which has risen further since.502 As a part of their mission to reduce stigma and stereotyping of persons with mental disorders, some of these organizations have also begun to play an active role in media criticism by reviewing, advising on, praising, or, when necessary, protesting the portrayal of patients and depictions of madness in works of popular culture. For example, NAMI praised and promoted the aforementioned Homeland for its sensitive and nuanced portrayal of the main character’s struggle with bipolar disorder, engaging the writers and producers of the series in dialogue about their artistic and storytelling decisions.503 On the other hand, the organization heavily criticized the series Wonderland (2000), which takes place inside the psychiatric emergency unit of a fictional New York City hospital, for its choice of setting and themes. Wonderland, which premiered at a time when the subject matter was not yet represented too frequently on primetime television, was found to show a bleak and hopeless outlook on life with mental disorder, as well as sensationalized depictions of violence and self-harm, which prompted NAMI to request disclaimers be put at the beginning and end of every episode in order to offset the potentially stigmatizing effects.504 In short, for all its shortcomings, deinstitutionalization has accomplished two things which were, if not impossible, then at least exceedingly difficult, under the asylum system. The first is that it has given patients the chance to speak, not just about


their experiences, but about the images and messages of madness which inundate American (popular) culture. At various points in *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault criticizes the asylum as a tool developed in order to silence those who do not fit within the established norms of society. While this intent is, if not universally unlikely,505 then at least indeterminable, there is no doubt that sequestration and confinement have encouraged silence, both by making it difficult for persons on the inside to make their voices heard and by giving those on the outside the luxury of ignoring those kept out of sight. The second accomplishment of deinstitutionalization is that, in one way or the other, it is forcing Americans to rethink their ambivalent relationship with the soundness of their own minds: simultaneously so valued and valuable that its loss is akin to a social death sentence, and yet so neglected in terms of national (health care) priorities.

### 5.3. Madness and the American Media Landscape

The high degree of uncertainty and ambivalence which characterizes attitudes and approaches towards issues related to the soundness of the mind is inevitably reflected in the American media landscape, where fiction and nonfiction meet, mingle and clash in the daily flood of talk radio programs, reality shows, news tickers, celebrity tweets, sitcoms, television dramas, Facebook posts, high-gloss gossip magazines and weighty Times New Roman headlines. As the primary meaning- and opinion-makers of the 20th and 21st centuries, the mass media play a critical role in informing public attitudes towards mental health issues and the people struggling with them. Psychologist Otto Wahl observes as much in the opening chapter of his seminal work *Media Madness*, wherein he states that few Americans can trace their knowledge of mental disorders to objective, scientific sources like psychiatric journals; rather, many absorb the fictionalized or sensationalized messages of news reporting, films and television shows and subconsciously incorporate them into their understanding of real-world mental disorders.506 Wahl’s *Media Madness*, which was originally published in 1995 and remains one of the few comprehensive works on the subject, focuses on the presentation of madness in the three above-mentioned areas: news reporting, film, and television entertainment. It largely leaves aside literature and comics beyond the comic strips published in daily newspapers, most likely on account of the fact that cinema and television remain the dominant forces in

505 In 19th-century America, the initial drive to establish asylums was fueled by humanitarian concerns over the mistreatment and neglect of “mad” persons by their families and communities. See for instance Dix.

the American media landscape. Videogames are not taken into consideration at all, given their comparatively low presence and cultural impact at the time: As mentioned previously, in the early 1990s, personal computers and game consoles were not yet a fixture in the average American household, and games themselves were far from being understood as a legitimate narrative medium. This, of course, differs substantially from the situation in 2015, since videogames can now be counted among the most lucrative and influential segments of American entertainment media. Although there exist no studies regarding the effects of the presentation of madness on the players, one can safely assume that, given their mass appeal, said presentations do their part in shaping public attitudes and popular imagination. It should be noted at this point that this thesis does not aim to supply such a study. This is not only due to material and time constraints, but also due to the fact that as of the time of writing, there are few publications on the topic of health issues in game narratives and none on the topic of madness. In an attempt to rectify this situation, this thesis will focus on the depiction of madness in said narratives in relation to popular culture as a whole. However, in order to explain why these depictions of madness possess such relevance in the American context and resonate so deeply with American audiences (to the point where several of them are considered classics), it is necessary to keep in mind the general discursive trends and their effects on American conceptions of fictional madness and real-world mental illness.

Although the near omnipresence of mass media seems to amount to little more than background noise in the life of the average American citizen – the reliable Sunday paper on the front step, the drone of an overhead television in a family restaurant, the furtive peek at Facebook in the middle of a boring workday – theories from the fields of sociology and mass communication research suggest that mass media consumption, however absent-minded, can affect a person’s perception of reality. For instance, according to cultivation theory, which was developed by George Gerbner and Larry Gross in the late 1960s in response to the growing presence of television in American daily life, prolonged exposure to a stream of consistent messages (e.g. via news reporting) will “cultivate,” i.e. encourage and reinforce, a perception of social reality in the viewer that closely matches its presentation on television: “[T]hose who spend more time ‘living’ in the world of television are more likely to see the ‘real world’ in terms of the images, values, portrayals, and ideologies that emerge through the lens of television.” For example, an ardent viewer who is exposed to many news reports on and depictions of violent crime may come to perceive the world

---

outside the television set as more dangerous and unsafe than they otherwise would. This becomes particularly relevant in the context of news reporting on mental illness, which is arguably the most common source of information on the subject for the average American citizen\(^9\) and sets itself apart from other avenues of mass communication by its claim to impartiality and factuality. A surprisingly modest number of media analyses conducted over the past three decades on the portrayal of mental disorders in US news media, primarily newspapers and television, paint a picture with a considerable bias towards stories of crime and violence. A 1995 examination of 83 newspaper articles gathered over the course of two years detected two main themes, namely anxiety about the progress of deinstitutionalization (i.e. the closure of hospitals) and an increasingly stereotypical characterization of persons with mental illness as violent and unpredictable.\(^9\) A larger 2002 study by Wahl, Wood and Richards, which analyzed 300 articles from six major American newspapers from the years 1989 and 1999, also found that reports of crime and acts of violence dominate the subject of mental illness, although the samples from 1999 also indicated an increasing awareness of stigma and health care difficulties. The study further notes that in both 1989 and 1999, reports tended towards sensationalized presentations of the subject, for example by highlighting a suspect’s mental health history in the headline.\(^9\) Wahl goes so far as to suggest that the discovery of a suspect with a history of mental illness in a criminal case makes the story “juicier,” which indicates that the purpose of such news is not merely to inform, but to horrify and thrill in a manner oddly reminiscent of crime fiction.\(^1\) Furthermore, he proposes that the supposed link between criminality/violence and mental disorder may be a source of relief to the wider public, since it allows for the conclusion that “normal” people would not be capable of committing such heinous acts.\(^2\) This desire to create a barrier between the “normal” and the (mentally) “abnormal” is underscored by the language used to report and describe incidents involving persons with mental illness. All too often, news head- and taglines are still prone to using colloquial, derogatory terms such as “crazies,” “psychos,” or “maniacs” when referring to the subjects of their reports.\(^3\) This practice is unfortunately not limited to coverage of

---


\(^1\) Wahl 85.

\(^2\) Wahl 65.

violent crimes and their perpetrators, but can even spill over into other contexts: one of the most infamous examples being the coverage of a fire in a psychiatric hospital in New Jersey in 2002, which was prefaced by the headline “Roasted Nuts” in a local newspaper.514

The presentation of persons with mental illness in the news media is largely concurrent with the portrayal of madness and mad characters in fictional media, most notably novels, film and television. Although mainstream television, in particular, has taken the first steps towards more nuanced and varied portrayals in recent years with shows like the above-mentioned Homeland, Person of Interest, Monk or The United States of Tara (a comedy-drama series about a suburban housewife struggling with dissociative identity disorder), the overwhelming majority of depictions draws on outdated, largely negative stereotypes and assumptions. Even when madness is framed – as is the case in most works of 20th/21st-century fiction (see Chapter 6) – in the language of psychiatry, i.e. when it is presented as a medical condition with specific symptoms and treatment options, it is most often a trait (and sometimes even the only trait) of antagonistic figures – the murderers and rapists in procedural dramas, the villains in action films and comic books, the jilted lovers in romantic comedies and relationship dramas. Wahl attributes the prevalence of negative portrayals to the lasting influence of the Motion Picture Production Code, which once stipulated that evil must be clearly shown to be wrong and repellent; in other words, morally reprehensible figures could not be characterized as ordinary citizens who commit crimes out of comprehensible, even sympathetic motives, lest the depicted criminal behavior could be understood as desirable and worthy of emulation. The easiest way around this problem, so Wahl, was to simply declare the offending character “mad.”515 Wahl’s assessments are supported by several other media analyses conducted in the 1990s and 2000s. Among them are Donald Diefenbach’s 1997 content survey of the portrayal of mental illness on US prime-time television, in which he concludes that characters with some form of mental affliction are portrayed as disproportionately more violent compared to “normal” characters, and drastically more violent than real persons with mental illness, and are thus shown to have a negative effect on society overall.516 A 2006 article by Heather Stuart reveals that comparatively little has changed in the interim. Although around one-fifth of US prime time television shows present “some


515 Wahl 123.

aspect of mental illness,” the overall portrayal is decidedly skewed towards the negative: “One in four mentally ill characters kill[s] someone, and half are portrayed as hurting others, making the mentally ill the group most likely to be involved in violence.”517 Most often, the characters are shown to be defined, not to say consumed, by their madness; if they are shown to possess any other traits aside from their psychiatric condition, these frequently fall in line with old clichés and stereotypes: lonely or antisocial, unkempt or untidy, prone to incoherence, outlandish interests or visible tics that mark them as “abnormal.” Most interestingly, few are allowed to get better – years of therapy and medication are often shown to have little to no positive effect on the sick character, which leaves the protagonist(s) no choice but to forcefully rid themselves of the madman or -woman – often by ending their very life. For example, in the 1978 horror classic Halloween, the masked killer Michael Myers is declared irredeemably evil by his own psychiatrist, who is eventually left with no recourse but to shoot Myers at point-blank range in order to put an end to his crime spree.518 This type of resolution not only makes an appearance in older works or genres with fantastical elements, since modern dramas, thriller novels and television police procedurals (all of which tend to strive for a degree of authenticity and realism) tend to resort to a similar pattern of crime and punishment. A particularly illustrative example comes from the episode “Derailed” of the psychological crime drama series Criminal Minds (2005-present), which deals with the case of Dr. Bryar, a theoretical physicist suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. Bryar, freshly released from years of therapy in a mental hospital, boards a train to speak at a conference when he recognizes an FBI agent and becomes convinced that the government is spying on him. This prompts him to draw a gun and take the entire train hostage. At the climax of the episode, just when the protagonists have convinced Bryar to end the hostage situation and surrender peacefully, Bryar is fatally shot by a SWAT team.519 Although their genre and approaches are vastly different, both Halloween and “Derailed” ultimately draw upon the same convention: The overwhelming threat presented by the “homicidal maniacs” forces the hand of justice to


518 Myers, in the manner of a supernatural monster, is implied to survive the fatal shooting and indeed makes his return in a steady string of sequels, but this only serves to underline his inhumanity. Halloween, dir. John Carpenter (Falcon International, 1978).

519 “Derailed,” Criminal Minds, writ. Jeff Davis, CBS, 23 Nov. 2005. A similar fate awaits another character with paranoid schizophrenia on the show: Ben Foster, a serial killer who is compelled to murder by his hallucinations, is shot and killed by the protagonists (ep. 6.19). Although other culprits with the same illness are arrested instead, they are nevertheless portrayed as excessively violent, e.g. as murderous stalkers or serial killers (cf. eps. 1.17, 5.07 and 6.08).
dispose of them for the greater good.

Comedies and children’s entertainment tend to rely on similar, if less fatal, tropes and stereotypes. Characters who are understood to be mad are often portrayed in the same physically distinctive ways mentioned above – unkempt, poorly dressed, with facial tics, nervous twitches or visible disfigurement – which are exaggerated for humorous effect. Wahl points out that if these characters are not the focus of the story, their physical and social deviancy serve as stand-ins for nuanced characterization, and outlandishly specific or inappropriate habits allow the audience to easily identify these otherwise flat characters. On the whole, Wahl summarizes, these characters are neither meant to be taken seriously by the audience nor are they taken seriously by their “sane” fellow cast members. Contrary to the homicidal maniac, whose madness turns them into a nigh unstoppable menace, the comedic madman (or -woman) is a harmless repository of eccentricities and punchlines: amusing, but ultimately meant to be discounted. At times, the lines between the humorous, but harmless eccentric and the dangerous maniac are blurred within one and the same story, or even within one and the same character. This occurs, for example, in the 2000 comedy *Me, Myself & Irene*, starring Jim Carrey as Charlie, a meek, kind man whose life is plagued by Hank, his ill-natured, violent, and obscene delusion/split personality/alter ego. “Hank” is described as a symptom of Charlie’s “advanced delusional schizophrenia with involuntary narcissistic rage” (a medical-sounding, albeit completely fictional diagnosis), but portrays him in a manner much closer to the classic Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde conceptualization of the “split personality” – an alter ego that surfaces at inopportune moments to do and say all the things the protagonist is not courageous enough to do or say himself. The film is ostensibly a romantic comedy, centered around Charlie/Hank’s infatuation with the titular Irene and the series of misadventures the two (or three) become involved in. Yet Hank’s outbursts fit the repertoire of the homicidal maniac of pulp and horror fiction more than they do the harmless eccentric common to comedies – among other things, Hank attempts to drown a child who has insulted him, rams an unpleasant neighbor’s car through a storefront window, and sexually assaults a breastfeeding woman by taking the place of her baby. The result is a clash rather than a mixture of two stereotypes, one of which is meant to be laughed at (and laughed off), the other of which is to be feared and considered repulsive. In a sense, the film encapsulates – albeit unintentionally – the two extremes which govern the

520 Wahl 29.
521 Wahl 33.
522 *Me, Myself & Irene*, dir. Peter Farelly and Bobby Farelly (20th Century Fox, 2000).
The portrayal of madness in American fiction (and, to a certain extent, in the American news media as well). Juxtaposed like this, they make an awkward pair, a bogeyman and a caricature sharing the same space and vying for an audience who is paying rapt attention, drawn in by the peculiar allure of madness.

5.4. Summing up

Even a casual glance at the American media landscape suggests that, in a manner of speaking, Americans have the mind on their minds. This is in large part due to several long-incubating issues related to public health and well-being which have, in some form or another, been thrust into the news headlines and to the forefront of public attention: the ailing behemoth better known as the US health care system, the negative consequences of and resultant public worries about the well-intended, but poorly funded and executed deinstitutionalization movement, the persistent stigma attached to diagnoses of mental illness and associated psychiatric treatments, as well as anxieties about a supposed rise in mental and developmental disorders in children, to name only a few. In addition, American cultural values, as well as attitudes to that which is strange, foreign, or “other,” have been shaken and altered by a number of major political and socioeconomic upheavals, and their long-term consequences: the attacks of September 11 and the resulting “war on terror,” the recent global financial crisis, the establishment of a secret and far-reaching surveillance network in the name of public safety, and so on. Such doubt and uncertainty has the tendency to contribute to a heightened interest in, not to say a hunger for, the depiction of madness in works of fiction, which, to borrow Rohr’s words from the introduction once more, then “unfold their critical, subversive or oppositional significance.” As this chapter has indicated, contemporary fictional works of American popular culture are saturated with this awareness of the mind and replete with the theme of madness: Apart from the host of psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists, profilers, mentalists and mind readers, deranged serial killers, stalkers, cannibalistic sociopaths, and traumatized victims who populate the crime and mystery genres, popular culture has also given a spotlight to shell-shocked soldiers,

---

humorously neurotic geeks, housewives with multiple personalities, and narcissistic doctors with Vicodin addictions. Madness, whether in the form of quirky “otherness” or existential struggles, seems to be everywhere.

Yet, as topical (and popular) as the theme may be, it is also incredibly old. Many of the conventions, clichés, stereotypes and archetypes which continue to populate contemporary narratives of madness – often to the chagrin of mental health advocacy groups and medical professionals – are variations on centuries-old beliefs, religious tenets, moral maxims, philosophical arguments and medical theories. For this reason, the next chapter will move away from the social and political conundrums surrounding mental illness in present-day America and take a closer look at the major influences on modern depictions of madness. Although videogames will not feature prominently in the following, either, the next chapter will provide the much-needed contextual basis for an examination of the theme of madness in this very young storytelling medium. After all, the aim of this thesis is to contextualize videogame stories within the wider field of pop culture narratives, from which they are all too often dissociated. The above-mentioned age-old influences have proven remarkably resilient in the face of the advance of secularization, rationalism and the scientific method – indeed, it can be argued that many of them now feed a desire for the mystical, the irrational and the inexplicable. This is not only because the human mind is, as mentioned in 5.1., a still largely undiscovered country with a long and complex history of exploration, but also because many of the attempts at an explanation of its ills and injuries are entangled with questions such as the nature of evil, the mastery of desire, and the existence of free will – all of which are the stuff on which fiction thrives. When added to the host of real-world issues which are so deeply entangled with the theme of madness – attitudes towards people with mental illness, the formation of lay psychiatric explanations for unusual behavior, the emancipation of psychiatric patients, even the creation of health care policy and provision of services – it becomes all the more vital to be conscious of the power of storytelling, not to mention to develop a nuanced understanding of the images of madness which flicker daily across America’s front pages, television channels, and computer screens.
6. Stranger than Fiction: Madness and American Popular Culture

“Human madness is oftentimes a cunning and most feline thing. When you think it fled, it may have but become transfigured into some still subtler form.”

– Ishmael (Moby-Dick)

Although the surge in the presence of madness in American entertainment media may be relatively recent, the theme of madness itself is incredibly old. And just like modern American beliefs about and attitudes towards the mind and its disorders carry a lot of historical baggage, contemporary depictions of madness in American literature, film and, indeed, videogames also draw upon storytelling conventions and themes which were first popularized centuries ago. Depictions of madness in Western art and literature date back to the myths and legends of antiquity and beyond, to the prophetic visions of the oracles, the frenzied ecstasy of the Dionysian followers, the tormented heroes and heroines of Greek tragedy like Orestes and Achilles, Medea and Cassandra. In fact, madness is so strongly present in European myth and folklore that some scholars refer to madness as “the disease of heroes;” for example Ruth Padel argues that the presence of madness in many storytelling traditions – not just Greek, but also Arthurian legend and Irish myth – marks heroes as especially prone to madness. Literary madness – in contrast to any medical illness – is also laden with metaphor; in his analysis of the madness of the Greek heroes, Allen Thiher argues that their madness (though it is rarely “named” as such) almost invariably entails a severing of the hero’s social bonds, with their community and their gods, thus starting a descent into isolation and “pure subjectivity.” Given the ancientness and meaning-laden nature of madness, the topic of its literary development yields a wealth of material, which is why many authors choose to limit their scope from the outset by examining only particular texts, genres or writers from a certain time period, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar do in several chapters of their seminal work, The Madwoman in the Attic (1979), which focuses on female writers of Victorian literature. The area of film studies likewise offers a growing body of works on celluloid representations of madness, such as Michael Fleming and Roger Manvell’s Images of Madness (1985), which examines the portrayal of insanity in roughly 45 movies released between 1920 and

525 Herman Melville, Moby-Dick; or The Whale, 1851 (Berkeley: U of California P, 1979) 187.
1985, or the more recent *Real Psychiatry* by David Robinson (2004), which provides an overview of the portrayal of psychiatric conditions in mainstream Hollywood films with the purpose of assessing their medical accuracy. Due to the startling depth and variety of the subject matter, however, comprehensive works are far rarer. As mentioned previously, Lillian Feder offers one of the few general overviews on the subject with *Madness in Literature* (1980) by tracing the evolution of the theme of madness from the Dionysiac myths and rites of Ancient Greece to the interpretations of 20th-century poets such as Sylvia Plath and Allen Ginsberg. Allen Thiher offers a similarly thorough treatment of the subject in *Revels in Madness* (1999), in which he explores the parallels between medical views on madness and literary representations of the same. The essay collection *Dionysus in Literature* (1994) presents an even broader take on the subject by discussing, among other things, the relation between madness and creativity, and the lives of authors who were said to be mad or who were diagnosed with a mental disorder.

Indeed, the theme of madness possesses such a long and complex history, and provides so many angles and interpretations for investigation, that a truly thorough treatment of the subject would fill the entirety of the *Encyclopedia Americana* and still just barely scratch the surface. Certainly, a single chapter of this thesis cannot hope to offer a comprehensive treatment; rather, it seeks to trace the origins of several particularly common patterns of portraying madness in contemporary American narratives of pop culture for two main reasons. The first is that narratives of 20th/21st-century popular culture build upon far older beliefs about and interpretations of madness, none of which have ever truly left public consciousness. Whereas other beliefs and worldviews have been dispelled by scientific reasoning and discoveries – for example, outside the realm of speculative fiction, it would be quite odd indeed to see an author maintain that the Earth is anything other than an oblong spheroid – many old beliefs related to the human mind (and the portrayals they inspired in fiction) still linger, regardless of any the objections raised by doctors and neuroscientists. As Wahl states in *Media Madness*:

> The images of mental illness that appear in today’s mass media reflect conceptualizations and representations of people with mental illnesses that have been around for centuries. The creative professionals of today’s media are, in some ways, just carrying on traditional depictions of the past. Many of today’s images are repetitions or residuals of long-standing popular beliefs.\(^{528}\)

The second reason pertains to the medium whose narratives and portrayals of madness form the basis of

\(^{528}\) Wahl 114.
this thesis. Although the particular demands of this topic have forced the medium of the videogame to the sidelines for the time being, its curious niche position in the academic and media discourse must nevertheless be taken into consideration. Despite the substantial influence of games on various aspects of American popular culture and daily life (see Chapter 3), games are often discussed in isolation from other media and any wider trends in popular culture. Considering that videogames are in the truest sense a medium born from pop culture influences, and considering that madness has a rather firm grip on American popular culture as a whole, the perpetuation of such a narrow focus would do more harm than good. At worst, it would reinforce a view of games and their stories as mere curiosities without relation to or bearing on other pop culture phenomena and narratives. Hence, this chapter is structured with the aim of (re-)contextualization. A look at some of the commonalities in the depictions of madness in other media, as well as the origins of said depictions, provides the much-needed context for a close examination of madness in game narratives. This, in turn, allows for a deeper understanding of the kinds of stories which possess a particular staying power in American popular culture as a whole.

For these reasons, the following points will explore six broad perspectives of madness which have become so deeply ingrained in American cultural history and fiction that it is impossible to imagine any work of contemporary popular culture without them. As stated above, this exploration is far from comprehensive; rather, it highlights the red threads of madness which run through 20th/21st-century American narratives, regardless of medium or genre – fascinating, repulsing and entertaining modern American audiences just the same as they did centuries ago.

6.1. Madness and the Supernatural

The interference of supernatural forces, be they good or evil, is one of the oldest attempts at explaining unusual behavior. In absence of concrete indicators of a physical disease, strange occurrences like trances, visions, seizures, glossolalia, etc., were attributed to the meddling of gods and devils, possession by ghosts or demons, the influence of the stars, or the spellcraft of witches and wizards. Not all madness was necessarily seen as the work of an ill-intentioned deity or spirit; many religious belief systems and specific cults formed their rituals around certain kinds of madness and deliberately sought or still seek to induce

---

529 Spacewar (1961), the game which is most commonly credited as the first “real” videogame, is the fruit of its programmers’ love of pulp science-fiction novels and low-budget space opera movies. Arnie Katz, ed. “Players Guide to Electronic Science-Fiction Games,” Electronic Games 1.2 (1982): 36.
altered states of consciousness (e.g. oracles, prophecy, ecstatic frenzy, etc.). Certain philosophers of antiquity even viewed particular kinds of madness as divine gifts: Plato, for example, describes the positively connoted “divine release from the norms of conventional behavior” as the source of some of “our greatest blessings,” counting among them prophetic abilities, mystical and poetic inspiration, as well as the “madness” of love. Christian lore, too, is full of stories of saints and believers hearing voices which inspire them to perform great deeds, alongside stories of madness being doled out as divine punishment (e.g. the Biblical tale of King Nebuchadnezzar, who is stricken with madness for his arrogant ways) or satanic machinations. Belief in supernatural causes of madness also accompanied the deeply devout Puritans to America, who, although aware and versed in the medical theories of the day as to the causes of madness, were more likely to attribute manifestations of madness to devilish trickery or the ineffable will of God as they were to concede that a patient might be suffering from disordered “humors” within the body. The Puritan minister Cotton Mather gives several accounts of “madness” in his *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702) in order to emphasize the workings of divine providence, such as the case of a fellow minister who spoke critically of the clergy and was punished accordingly: “God smote him with a horrible madness” in the midst of preaching before his congregation, causing him to become “ravingly distracted.” The clergyman, whom Mather resolves not to name, had to be forcibly removed from church, and remained unable to speak of religion without “fly[ing] out into a fit of madness” for the rest of his life. More often, however, madness was ascribed to the machinations of Satan and the supernatural creatures in league with him. In his account of the Salem Witch Trials (1692-1693), Mather lists among the deeds of a witch her ability to torment the innocent with “devils.” These devils, so Mather, which have “driven many poor people to despair, and persecuted their minds” and have caused them to

---

532 Plato, *Phaedrus* 55.
533 The theory of the four humors has its roots in classical Greek medicine and philosophy, which attributed certain personality traits or moods to the behavior of particular fluids within the body, called “humors” (namely blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile). A supposed excess in either of those fluids was associated with an excess in the corresponding temperament (sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric and melancholic), and was said to be rectified through the “purging” of the fluid in question. The theory remained in use throughout the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and far into the 18th century, and featured heavily in the earliest medical publications on the subject of madness, such as Robert Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1632) and William Battie’s *A Treatise on Madness* (1758). In both publications, the author recommends a variety of tinctures and (to modern ears) outlandish treatments in order to calm the disordered “humors” of patients.
“run distracted with terrors,” are banished once the root of said evil, the witch, is found and killed.\textsuperscript{535} Religious melancholy, a condition characterized by excessive moral guilt and religious fear, which became a growing problem in the strictly pious and moralistic Puritan society, was also seen as the work of Satan. The famed fire-and-brimstone preacher Jonathan Edwards tells of a “gentleman of more than common understanding, of strict morals, religious in his behavior, and a useful and honorable person in the town” who cut his own throat after the devil “took the advantage and drove him to despairing thoughts.”\textsuperscript{536} The poet and pastor Edward Taylor specifically addresses this religious melancholy in his “Meditations.” In Meditation 1.49, he describes the devil’s influence as “A Lock of Steel upon my Soule, whose key/The serpent keeps, I fear, doth lock my doore”\textsuperscript{537} and gives advice in order to aid sufferers in overcoming this warped form of faith and return to the path to true worship.

Due to the steady secularization of American society in the interim centuries, belief in and the portrayal of supernaturally inflicted madness has dwindled considerably. However, some vestiges of it still remain in works of contemporary popular culture, particularly in genre fiction and film. High fantasy literature, whose settings are inspired by the Middle Ages in terms of knowledge/technology and are suffused with religious mysticism and magic, often invokes the influences of divine, demonic or ghostly beings and powers upon the mental state of its characters. Even when the story is not set in a world inspired by the beliefs and standards of knowledge in pre-modern Europe, however, supernatural powers which affect the characters’ mental state and have the potential to drive them to madness remain. In works belonging to the low/urban fantasy genre, which takes place in a fictional or fictionalized modern-day urban setting (thus the name), the supernatural is present and able to exert its influence on the largely oblivious humans, while only a few initiated characters are able to recognize the forces at work and combat them with spiritual powers of their own. The immensely successful television series \textit{Buffy the Vampire Slayer} (1997-2003) is but one example of this genre: Set in a small town in late 1990s California, the series routinely features characters who go temporarily or permanently “mad” due to the influence of eldritch demons, spirit possession, mind-altering or mind-controlling magic and curses, or strange and


\textsuperscript{536} Jonathan Edwards, \textit{A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton, Massachusetts, A.D. 1735} (New York: Dunning & Spalding, 1832) 105.

powerful ancient artifacts. Certain supernatural creatures are even shown to have the power to “break” human minds, i.e. to brutalize a character’s mind so thoroughly that they become, in the truest sense of the term, “ravingly distracted.”

In addition, remnants of supernaturally-induced madness survive even in genres of film and literature that, at first glance, seem to firmly reject the supernatural in favor of science and technology, i.e. science fiction. The 1997 science fiction horror film Event Horizon, for example, is set on board the wreckage of a spacecraft designed for interstellar travel. When a rescue team arrives to ascertain the ship’s fate, they begin to experience nightmareish hallucinations, similar to the missing crew, who are discovered to have gruesomely murdered one another in a fit of collective insanity. Eventually, it is revealed that a malfunction in the experimental engine catapulted the ship and its crew outside of the known universe and into another dimension, which is described as a place of “pure chaos, pure evil.” The massacre among the crew and the degenerating mental state of the rescuers are, in fact, due to that hellish dimension, which still exerts its influence via the experimental engine core. Another example is the 2002 science-fiction film Solaris, based on Stanislaw Lem’s 1961 novel of the same name, which is set on a research station orbiting the strange new planet Solaris. Efforts to study the planet are hindered when the researchers aboard the station begin to experience disturbing dreams: In their sleep, they are confronted with their own repressed thoughts and emotional traumas, only to find upon waking that these most hidden aspects of themselves have been given flesh in the form of the very person(s) most closely associated with a particular thought or memory – usually a replica of a loved one or of themselves, brought into existence by the mysterious planet Solaris. Unable to cope with the shock of being confronted with these manifestations, the scientists experience psychological breakdowns, some even committing suicide or trying to murder the replicas in their traumatized states. Although the negative experiences and unacknowledged aspects of their personalities definitely originate from within the characters, it is the interference of Solaris which brings them to the surface and, more importantly, gives them a form which proves to be traumatizing to human minds. Both films filter archaic ideas of incomprehensible forces which are capable of inflicting madness on humans through the techno-scientific worldview of the 20th and 21st centuries. In both cases, the gods, demons and spirits of old have been

539 Solaris, dir. Steven Soderbergh (20th Century Fox, 2002).
replaced by phenomena within the realm of scientific possibility or phenomena which have been inspired by scientific theories, e.g. higher dimensions, unknown forms of radiation, or incomprehensible alien life.

6.2. Madness and Evil

The link between madness and evil has a long tradition in Western cultural history and thinking. From relatively innocuous beliefs like the idea that the beauty and purity of the soul are outwardly reflected by a beautiful body and countenance, to the above-mentioned belief that madness is the result of either divine punishment or an indication of a covenant with the devil, Christian doctrine and philosophy provide a plethora of implicit as well as explicit associations between madness and moral corruption, vice and godlessness. Feder notes that, beginning in the Middle Ages, madness is frequently portrayed in narratives with a didactic focus such as morality plays and cautionary tales, wherein the crimes and sins committed by the protagonist culminate in his madness and eventual punishment, which is most often “death and damnation.” Occasionally, however, madness is portrayed not as a permanent punishment, but rather as a trial which the sinner must overcome on the path to true repentance. The traits which the mad characters exhibit in those early works – notably wildness, violence, animalistic behavior and self-destructiveness – not only indicate that they have become alienated from the human community, but revert once the characters affirm their faith.

Many of these old-world conceptions of sin and insanity accompanied the first settlers, as already indicated in 6.1. Apart from their belief in a vengeful god, the Puritans saw the body as the frail, mortal prison for the immortal soul, and believed that the devil would first assault the body (e.g. via illness, pain or physical marks like scars and disfigurements) in order to corrupt a person’s soul. This in turn gave rise to a rhetoric which described the body as weak, perfidious and hostile: “So soon as we rise in the morning, we go forth to fight with two mighty giants, the world and the devil; and whom do we take with us but a traitor, this brittle flesh, which is ready to yield up to the enemy at every assault?” The only option, according to Puritan belief, was to fortify this frail prison, to control and strengthen the body rigorously. Anyone lacking in discipline and engaging in improper conduct was seen as inviting Satanic

---

540 Feder 101.
541 Feder 101.
corruption of their very soul – taken the other way around, expressions of a disordered mind/soul (e.g. melancholia or mania) were often seen as a result of sinful behavior. Yet, this attitude was far from uniform: Norman Dain notes that some Puritan ministers like Mather and Edwards occasionally refrained from attributing madness to sin if they knew the victims personally and could vouch for their righteousness. According to Dain, Mather considered his third wife mad, though he variously attributed her condition to heredity or demonic possession instead of an offense against God or a covenant with the devil.

However, Puritan beliefs and morals alone do not account for the consistent portrayal of mad characters as evil, criminal, antagonistic or, at the very least, dangerous and unpredictable over the centuries. Shifts in the understanding of madness, which slowly came to be regarded as a treatable condition, or even as a biologically predetermined disposition instead of an act of God, played a part as well. For example, during the 19th century, physicians in the slowly forming field of psychiatry came to attribute madness to a lack of moral restraint, education and guidance, since these were “causes” which could be controlled through human intervention. Violations of societal norms, such as domestic and marital difficulties, excessive behavior (particularly the consumption of alcohol), overwork, ambition, sexual deviance (e.g. masturbation, homosexuality), and traditional Christian vices like pride and jealousy were said to influence the outbreak of madness.

Early 20th-century eugenicists, who campaigned in the US with considerable fervor, also favored a rhetoric which linked madness to evil: Mental patients were seen and spoken of as pollutants in the human gene pool, and allowing these “pollutants” to continue to exist was akin to letting a heinous crime go unpunished. According to Charles Davenport, a prominent biologist and eugenicist, “[s]ociety must protect itself, as it claims the right to deprive the murderer of his life so also it may annihilate the hideous serpent of hopelessly vicious protoplasm. Here is where appropriate legislation will aid in eugenics and in creating a healthier, saner society in the future.”

Some of the most extreme eugenicists presented their proposals as acts of mercy. For example, the Chicago surgeon Harry J. Haiselden, who hastened and/or failed to prevent the deaths of six “eugenically

543 Cf. Jimenez.
545 Grob 60.
defective” children, wrote and starred in the 1917 silent propaganda film “The Black Stork,” in which he fictionaled the story of one of the mentally and physically handicapped children who died in his care: In the film, the child patient is saved against Haiselden’s advice and grows up to be a monster, who later returns to murder the very doctors who once condemned him to a life of monstrosity. And, of course, unrelated moral concerns like those expressed in the regulations of Hollywood film-making in the 1930s (i.e. the Hayes Code) inadvertently contributed to it, as well: In an effort to discourage the audience from identifying with and possibly emulating antagonistic film characters and their crimes, many villainous characters were simply portrayed as insane.

Although the portrayal of mad characters has certainly come a long way since the 1930s, and an even longer way since the time of the Puritans, the link between madness and evil has not only survived, but been embraced by modern American popular culture. It is perhaps most readily apparent in works of the slasher and horror genres, such as the *Halloween* film series (1978-2009) or Bret Easton Ellis’s novel *American Psycho* (1991). Both works revolve around a violently insane murderer whose primary motivation appears to be a source of inherent evil. Ellis’s murderous madman, Patrick Bateman, manages to masquerade as a successful investment banker by day, but transforms into a sadistic serial killer by nightfall, ostensibly to allay his boredom with the consumerist lifestyle of the American upper class:

Soon everything seemed dull: another sunrise, the lives of heroes, falling in love, war, the discoveries people made about each other. The only thing that didn’t bore me, obviously enough, was how much money Tim Price made, and yet in its obviousness it did. There wasn’t a clear, identifiable emotion within me, except for greed and, possibly, total disgust. I had all the characteristics of a human being - flesh, blood, skin, hair - but my depersonalization was so intense, had gone so deep, that the normal ability to feel compassion had been eradicated, the victim of a slow, purposeful erasure.

Michael Myers, the masked slasher of *Halloween* fame, is portrayed as an escaped mental patient who pursues his victims relentlessly and kills indiscriminately, without reason and certainly without remorse. No explanation is ever given for Myers’s behavior other than his unidentified madness, which even his

---


548 Wahl 123.

549 Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage, 1991) 281. It should be noted that in Ellis’ novel, the main character’s violent and murderous behavior is highly ambiguous. Whether he actually commits the crimes he so lovingly narrates or whether they are simply the product of his twisted imagination is left open to interpretation.
psychiatrist describes as “pure evil.” The only recourse left for the protagonists in the film is to kill him, a course of action that is seen as justified due to Myers’s apparent irredeemable insanity. Similar portrayals can be found in the villains and their henchmen from other genres, many of whom are portrayed as mildly to severely “unhinged” – taking pleasure in torture and killing, nurturing god complexes, and/or concocting gruesome world-ending schemes for the sake of greed or revenge. Even the madman who lives in wilderness and behaves like a beast has his modern guises; for example, a curious melding of the archetype with the prototypical mad slasher occurs in the horror film *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). The film, set in an isolated part of rural Texas, features a family of inbred, cannibalistic recluses who hunt down and kill a group of teenagers who stumble upon their house. The most prominent and dangerous member of the family is Leatherface, a mute, infantile man who wears masks made of his victims’ skin to express his emotions and who wields a chainsaw not only as a horrific weapon, but as a screeching replacement for his voice. In his book on American monster narratives, Scott Poole even points out the references to frontier literature in the film, stating that Leatherface himself is a rather blatant allusion to James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking, “the hunter who becomes part of the natural landscape.” In this, the character of Leatherface bears a resemblance to the archetypal “wild man” who, violent, unkempt and uncivilized, often implicitly merges with the madman – for to live like a beast, one must be mad, and if one is mad, one behaves in bestial ways. Whereas the medieval tales of madness sought to convey lessons in morality and piety, however, the modern variant continues to endure mainly because it offers the audience a comforting perspective of the uncertain and seemingly fearsome world that flickers across their television screens and front pages. An evil madman who commits crimes is literally beyond all reason – he cannot be understood by “normal” people because he is mad, which offers a reassuring sense of distance, the guarantee that no one among the “sane” audience could ever commit such deeds. In addition, the evil madman garners no sympathy from the audience, who want to see him pay for his crimes swiftly and completely so as to return the world to a supposedly peaceful state.

550 *Halloween.*

551 Wahl 59-66.

6.3. Madness and Dissonance

Another interesting aspect is the link between madness and a character’s inability to align their goals, expectations or self-perception with those of the world around them. The theme has its roots in later Greek drama, where madness severs the bonds between the hero and his surroundings – his family, his comrades, and society itself – due to the hero’s internal conflict. In short, the hero’s ideals are proven to be incompatible with his outside circumstances or the actions he has been forced to take. Unable to reconcile these disparities, the hero eventually goes mad. Feder notes that the struggle “to apprehend and define the self in its dynamic relation to external reality”\textsuperscript{553} becomes central to the later Greek tragedies, but it is in the works of the great Renaissance dramatists like Marlowe and Shakespeare that this theme truly assumes the center stage. In \textit{King Lear}, which Feder discusses extensively, this struggle is exemplified by Lear’s descent into raging insanity and eventual childlike, feeble denial of his surroundings. Although his turmoil appears to be principally due to the injustice and humiliation he has suffered at the hands of his two eldest daughters, their actions merely cause Lear to realize that his own life is not what he thought it to be, and never was. The daughters he believed to be kind and loving do not love him at all, the stable kingdom he believed to have created as a mighty sovereign crumbles just as quickly as any other realm ruled by lesser men, leaving all he has built, gained and sacrificed in his life utterly meaningless. Lear’s spirit is crushed by the ruthless confrontation of his own self-image with a reality far too enormous to bear: The narrative of his life is revealed to be little more than a study in self-deception, and all the achievements he has used to form his identity as a beloved and powerful king have been scattered to the winds, never to return.

This deconstruction of the protagonist’s self-image and subsequent descent into madness also resurfaces in contemporary works of popular culture, albeit to a lesser degree than the portrayal of characters who simply “snap” (i.e. react drastically or violently) after being subjected to one injustice or humiliation too many. One example can be found in \textit{The Dark Knight}, a 2008 film based on the \textit{Batman} superhero comics. The film introduces a deuteragonist by the name of Harvey Dent, an upright and idealistic district attorney who has devoted his life to the eradication of corruption and organized crime in the fictional city of Gotham, vaguely reminiscent of prohibition-era Chicago. Although Dent’s ideals are repeatedly challenged by the tenacity of the mafia’s hold on the city and the appearance of a violent

\textsuperscript{553} Feder 98.
anarchist known only as “the Joker,” he remains steadfast in his beliefs until he is betrayed by his allies in the police force and loses both his fiancée and the left half of his face in a gruesomely sadistic assassination plot. Once he awakens in the hospital, Dent is visited by the Joker, who makes him realize in full the futility of his own struggle: All his good deeds, self-sacrifice and pain are on behalf of people who would happily allow him and his fiancée to die for their own small-minded plots and schemes. The very ideal he is constantly striving for – justice free from corruption – is impossible for him to achieve since even the people he is trying to protect are too scared, impotent or self-absorbed to do anything but either betray or abandon him to fight this impossible fight alone. This insight shatters Dent completely. Already consumed with rage and grief, he resolves to henceforth leave justice not to law and order, but to decide on the lives and deaths of others with the simple toss of a coin. Dent’s descent into madness lies in his decision to quite literally give himself over to unreason and disorder – his new justice is truly blind because it is decided by the only force in the world that, according to the Joker, is actually “fair”: complete chaos.554

6.4. Gothic Madness

The fascination with the subconscious, the irrational and the macabre that gripped writers of the 19th century coincided with the increasing scientific and philosophical interest in the stranger manifestations of the mind. As Lancelot Whyte notes in *The Unconscious before Freud*:

> From the eighteenth century onward growing interest was shown not only in the normal rhythms of consciousness (sleep, dreams, reveries, etc.), but also in unusual or pathological states (fainting, ecstasy, hypnosis, hallucinations, dissociation, drugged conditions, epilepsy, forgetfulness, etc.) and in processes underlying ordinary thought (imagination, judgment, selection, diagnosis, interest, sympathy, etc.)

555

Romanticism is frequently described as the literary reaction to the philosophical tenets of the Enlightenment, which focused on reason, objectivity, empiricism and temperance. Despite the fact that the writings of the Romantics can be understood as a rebellion, even a celebration of all things unreasonable and emotional, they nevertheless build upon a distinctly Enlightened understanding of madness. For it is the call for a rational, ordered world free from superstitions, base impulses and

554 *The Dark Knight*, dir. Christopher Nolan (Warner Bros., 2008).

mysticism which maneuvers “madness” into the vicinity of terms like “unreason” and “excess,” given that individuals who are understood to be mad are also regarded as incomprehensible, distempered and disordered. Feder describes the frequency of the juxtaposition of madness and unreason as a “pervasive metaphor” of the 17th and 18th centuries, which was used to symbolize political rebellion and religious nonconformity nearly as much as individual abnormality.

Whereas the rationalists of the Enlightenment era viewed madness as a threat to reason and social order, the Romantic poets of the 19th century came to follow a line of thinking similar to Plato’s, who saw certain kinds of madness as a creative gift. Rather than evil or undesirable, madness came to be portrayed as a primal form of expression, associated with untamed, uncivilized nature and the passions that teem within the human soul. In the works of the Romanticists and in Gothic literature, madness featured as a powerful force that was both creative and destructive, a gateway into a world that could not be understood with the tools of science and reason. It became an aspect of the atmosphere of emotional excess which permeates the literature of this time period – all-consuming passions, turbulent feelings, hidden or dark desires, self-destructive urges. As Thiher notes, “[t]o defend madness, their own true madness as well as madness they cultivated, poets tried to overload the circuits of rationality and to revel in the freeplay of the irrational joys of madness conceived as the supreme poetic experience.” More than dread and revulsion, madness came to thrill, to guide the reader into the minds of characters who truly were “mad, bad and dangerous to know,” but – as with Lord Byron, to whom the description was first applied – still worth knowing. The incentive was to look, rather than look away in fear.

In American literature, the beginnings of Romantic and Gothic madness emerge in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland*, which tells the story of a pair of siblings, Theodore and Clara Wieland, who are plagued by seemingly supernatural occurrences at their isolated estate. The siblings begin to hear disembodied voices that warn them of danger or command them to do certain things. Whereas Clara, the narrator, tries to accept and not dwell too much on the strange occurrences, her brother, who is described as having a gloomy, vaguely melancholic disposition, becomes obsessed with finding their source through empirical means. “If the senses be depraved,” he argues, “it is impossible to calculate the evils that may flow from the consequent deductions of the understanding.” Eventually, Theodore murders his wife.

---

556 Feder 147.
557 Thiher 205.
and children in a ritual sacrifice, claiming to have acted at the behest of the voices. Although the mystery of the voices is later revealed to be the work of the Wielands’ strange houseguest Carwin, a biloquist, he insists that he never ordered Theodore to commit such atrocious acts. This claim is strengthened by the fact that Clara often witnessed her brother behaving strangely without any discernible outside influence, for example by pausing and acting as if he were listening to inaudible commands. The novel offers no definitive reason or motive for Theodore’s descent into madness. Rather, its entire setting (the lonely, oppressive atmosphere at the Wieland estate), the family’s history (steeped in religious fanaticism) and the disposition of its characters seem to suggest that some manner of crisis is always imminent, just waiting for the right conditions in order to manifest. The novel encapsulates all the elements which ensnared the imagination of Victorian Americans – murder, madness, and a mysterious occurrence of possibly supernatural origin. Poole argues that American writers like Washington Irving specifically sought to create a “Gothic past” for the newly settled continent, hoping to populate it with specters, monsters and mythical frights to rival the rich folklore of the Old World.559 In fact, tales of lurid happenings on the other side of the Atlantic fascinated the American public of the 19th century to such a degree that they often re-appropriated stories of madness, monsters and murderers and transposed them (e.g. murders that occurred in the US were attributed to Jack the Ripper).560 The same dark imaginings most famously haunt the works of Edgar Allan Poe, in which he explores altered states of consciousness. Most of Poe’s narrator figures prove to be unreliable, their observations and statements questionable even though they repeatedly profess to be of sound mind and are convinced of the reality of the phenomena they witness. In “The Tell-Tale Heart,” Poe cloaks unreason in reason, insanity in sanity, as the narrator recounts his cold-blooded murder of an old man. Instead of pleading his innocence, the narrator insists on his sanity and seeks to justify the apparent baselessness of his deed with rational explanations. The narrator claims to have been motivated neither by greed nor other base desires, but by an overly nervous disposition and an “over-acuteness of the senses,”561 which left him unable to bear the gaze of the old man’s blind eye. As he recounts the deed, the narrator continually insists that he cannot be mad because he is not dull-witted or unreasonable at all, an assertion which he “proves” by highlighting his cautious planning, the

---

559 Poole 58.
560 Poole 73.
ingeniousness of dismembering the old man’s body and concealing it under the floorboards, his
certainty and the ease with which he distracts the policemen come to interrogate him. Even when he is
driven to confess the murder by the beating of the old man’s “hideous heart”562 under the floorboards, he
refuses to see the sound as the product of his own imagination, and instead suspects the policemen to be
mocking him when they “act” like they cannot hear it.

The fascination with the rational madman continues in modern-day fiction, for example in the
novels/films Silence of the Lambs and Red Dragon with the character of Hannibal Lecter, a well-educated and
esteemed psychiatrist who also happens to be a murderous cannibal. The 2012 television series Hannibal
centers entirely around the titular character’s ability to masquerade as a normal member of society,
oftentimes cooking his victims’ organs in plain sight of other characters, who believe them to be merely
animal meat. The thrill associated with madness, its taboo, its incomprehensibility, and its connection to
the “dark side” of human nature likewise lives on in contemporary popular culture, most notably in works
of crime fiction, thrillers and the horror genre. Many writers and directors consciously borrow from the
aesthetics, themes and the oppressive atmosphere of the 19th-century Gothic novel, of which madness is
an almost inescapable part. Examples include Stephen King’s The Shining (1977), in which the main
character is driven insane by his stay in a haunted hotel and, fueled by the urgings of the malignant ghosts
and his own alcoholism, attempts to murder his family; Robert Bloch’s American Gothic (1974), which tells
the story of a serial killer who lures beautiful young women into his castle home in order to murder them
in horrifyingly creative ways (inspired by the real serial killer H. H. Holmes); as well as the film The
Haunting (1963), in which a young woman succumbs to madness during her investigation of an allegedly
haunted house.

6.5. Madness and Disenfranchisement

In the 19th century, madness becomes increasingly politicized due to its association with colonialism, the
abolitionist movements on both sides of the Atlantic, and the burgeoning women’s rights movement,
which challenged, among other things, the supposedly normal, proper role of Victorian women – that of
the passive, demure and domestic “angel in the house.” Efforts to discredit and silence these (often
female) voices who were challenging the social order drew on psychiatric medicine and the then-popular

562 Poe 86.
diagnosis of hysteria, which ascribed to women a condition of emotional excess and irrationality supposedly grounded in their very physiology (hystera being the Greek word for “uterus”). By labeling dissenting women as hysterics, they were essentially declared mad for advocating for gender equality and demanding the recognition of their basic human rights. Elaine Showalter describes the way in which medical diagnosis and political rhetoric seamlessly merged to disempower and delegitimize feminist activists and their proposals for reform: “Conservatives saw feminism as the woman’s form of degeneration; doctors viewed hysterical women as closet feminists who had to be reprogrammed into traditional roles, and politicians attacked feminist activists as closet hysterics who needed treatment rather than rights.”

The same sentiment can also be found in personal accounts of women who were institutionalized against their will for the violation of social norms or due to marital difficulties. One well-known case is that of Elizabeth Parsons Ware Packard (1816-1897), a woman from Illinois who was sent to the Jacksonville Insane Asylum in 1860 for opposing the religious views of her husband, a church minister. Packard was kept confined in the asylum for three years on little more than the recommendation of one doctor, as was permissible under Illinois law at the time, until she finally managed to have her case brought before a jury and be declared sane. Packard subsequently became an activist for the rights of the mentally ill and those accused of being so, for, as she recounts in her report:

> It was a matter of great surprise to me to find so many in the Seventh ward, who, like myself, had never shown any insanity while there, and these were almost uniformly married women, who were put there either by strategy or by force. None of these unfortunate sane prisoners had had any trial or any chance of self-defense. [...] This led me to suspect that there was a secret understanding between the husband and the Doctor; that the subjection of the wife was the cure the husband was seeking to effect under the specious plea of insanity [...] .

Given the omnipresent patriarchal rhetoric and power structures, it is perhaps unsurprising that madness and the experience of being labeled as mad would also become a prominent theme in women’s literature of the Victorian era and beyond. Emily Dickinson, for example, expresses the power dynamics inherent to the label of madness in the poem “Much Madness is Divinest Sense” by describing the deceptive safety offered by staying silent and conforming to the judgment of the majority (“assent, and you are sane”) and

---

564 Levison 1009-1010.
the equally deceptive freedom offered by dissent and self-expression that is swiftly and brutally curtailed by the same majority judgment (“Demur, —you’re straightway dangerous, // And handled with a chain”).\textsuperscript{566} Gilbert and Gubar argue that tales of confinement and escape are characteristic of 19\textsuperscript{th}-century women’s literature and that many female authors of the era project “a mad double” into their works, which – often violently – enacts these escapes, such as Bertha Rochester in \textit{Jane Eyre}.\textsuperscript{567} However, the supposed subversive and empowering nature of female madness remains a hotly contested topic for many literary critics and other scholars. For example, Marta Caminero-Santangelo argues against the blanket categorization of female madness as “subversive” in her fittingly titled work \textit{The Madwoman Can’t Speak} (1998), stating that, “Perhaps the reason why the madwoman continues to be such an enticing figure is that she offers the illusion of power, although she in fact provides a symbolic resolution whose only outcome must be greater powerlessness.”\textsuperscript{568} Although the equation of a woman’s descent into madness with empowerment is indeed extremely problematic, many texts dealing with female madness nevertheless do contain subversive elements or messages. For instance, whether Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s nameless protagonist in “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) can be described as “empowered” is rather questionable. Her descent into madness is hardly a conscious choice; rather, it is the result of spending weeks, if not months, in solitary confinement for an unspecified “nervous illness” on the advice of her psychiatrist-husband. During this time, the narrator is forbidden from seeing visitors, going outside, writing, reading or even speaking very much lest her condition worsen. Although she appeals to her husband multiple times, describing her discomfort and unease, her concerns are summarily dismissed. Left with nothing to do except stare at the ugly, peeling yellow wallpaper of her bedroom, she eventually begins to see shapes and movement in and behind the patterns and discolored spots, and becomes convinced that the wallpaper is imprisoning women just like her, who are creeping along the floor. On the last day of their stay in the summer house, the protagonist locks herself in the room which she once hated, but now claims is safer than the outside world: “For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow. But here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long


smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way.” When her husband finally breaks down the door, he faints from the shock of finding her obsessively crawling along the walls on her hands and knees. His loss of consciousness only registers as a minor annoyance to the narrator, however, who bemoans that she now has to creep over him in order to continue her endless circles. The narrator, whose mind has been worn down by loneliness and forcible inactivity, is no more empowered than a prisoner who begins to experience hallucinations in solitary confinement, yet the story itself is subversive because it highlights the damage caused by the intensely patriarchal field of psychiatry at the time, not to mention other aspects and structures of Victorian society, e.g. marriage. The therapy which Gilman’s narrator describes is known as the “rest cure,” invented by the American neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell specifically to treat women’s “nervous illnesses” (e.g. depression, anorexia) by reducing mental and physical stimuli to a bare minimum, as Mitchell believed intellectual pursuits to interfere with a woman’s wifely duties and eventually drive her mad. Gilman herself experienced its adverse effects on her mental health after being prescribed the rest cure for her postpartum depression, and wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” partly in order to come to terms with her experience, and partly in order to highlight the damaging patriarchal assumptions underlying Mitchell’s rest cure.

Feminist aspects of madness, as well as female experiences of being regarded as and confined for being mad can also be found in 20th- and 21st-century women’s literature and film, regardless of genre. For instance, in Marge Piercy’s acclaimed science fiction novel Woman on the Edge of Time (1976), the protagonist Connie Ramos is involuntarily committed to a mental hospital after trying to protect her pregnant niece against an assault by her pimp. While confined and drugged, Connie makes contact with Luciente, a woman from the future, who allows her to catch glimpses of a Utopian post-gender society. However, this society is under constant attack by the Shapers, a group of beings who wish to gain control of Luciente’s people in order to “shape” them into ideal humans. These attacks parallel the growing threat to Connie’s own individuality and freedom in the present, where her psychiatrist has selected her to partake in an experiment which will control the emotions of patients who have been labeled incurable and

---

572 Interestingly, there also exist a few literary examples of male madness resulting from societal pressures, such as the 1996 novel Fight Club by Chuck Palahniuk and its subsequent adaptation into film.
violent. Eventually, Connie comes to realize that, as the woman on the edge of time (i.e. at a turning point in history) she must act – not only to preserve her own identity, but also to prevent a future in which the Shapers, using experiments such as the one she is to be subjected to, succeed in creating a stratified society where women are only valued as sexual objects. In order to stop the experiment before it can become a weapon to control people (particularly women), she manages to poison her doctors, knowing full well that it will cost her own life: “I’m a dead woman now too. I know it. But I did fight them. I’m not ashamed. I tried.”

It is left to the reader’s imagination as to whether Connie’s encounters with Luciente are mere hallucinations by a woman who has been stifled, both metaphorically and physically, by the patriarchal power structures which caused her to be declared mad in the first place (the pimp’s accusations, the judge’s sentencing, and her doctor’s surveillance), or whether Connie’s time-travel experiences are real and she has, in fact, prevented a terrifying future war. Although protagonist’s empowerment is once again debatable due to the ambiguous nature of Piercy’s novel, the novel itself definitely contains subversive aspects.

Another, more recent example can be found in a 2007 episode of the popular US-crime series Cold Case: “Boy Crazy” addresses the issue of enforcing rigid binary gender standards upon young women and labeling them “mad” when they fail to conform. The episode concerns itself with the case of Samantha “Sam” Randall, a 16-year-old girl who supposedly committed suicide in 1963. Upon the reopening of her case, the police discover that Samantha was chafing against the rigid moral and gender expectations of her time by dressing, behaving and identifying as a boy. Her desperate father eventually had her sent to a mental institution where “difficult” girls and young women were meant to be re-educated in order to conform to the image of the ideal woman at the time. Sam, brutalized and broken for resisting the re-education procedures, is eventually revealed to have begged her best friend to kill her in order to escape the torment.

In fact, the storyline of a girl or woman who is diagnosed as mentally ill and is forced to brave the threatening environment of an asylum has become a trope that is employed even in decidedly non-feminist stories such as the 2011 film Sucker Punch, which uses the premise of a young woman who is committed to a mental institution for witnessing a crime committed by her own stepfather. The movie

---

adopts a decidedly sexually fetishistic tone as the protagonist imagines the asylum as a brothel and formulates a complicated escape plan which she mainly carries out in the “alternate reality” of said brothel through the seduction of (male) hospital staff cast in the role of customers. While the merits of this portrayal are certainly up for debate, the fact remains that “the madwoman in the attic” has achieved recognition far beyond the female-centric and feminist writings which first gave birth to it.

6.6. Madness and Psychiatry

The relationship between fictional madness and (modern) psychiatry is an odd one, not least because the evolution of medical thought and methodology have not done for fictional madness what they have done for real-life “madness,” i.e. furthering the view of it as a specific group of classifiable and treatable illnesses. Of course, the influence of psychiatry and medicine on American popular culture is undeniable – one only has to look to the slew of medical and procedural television dramas which try to faithfully recapture or idealistically elevate the day-to-day trials and tribulations of doctors and prosecutors. Even outside these specific genres of fiction, characters routinely visit or at the very least reference visits to a psychiatrist, attend therapy sessions and psychological self-help groups, or are shown taking medication to cope with anxiety, depression, or any number of other psychiatric conditions. Adrian Monk, the titular character of the detective mystery series Monk, frequently visits a psychiatrist in order to cope with his various phobias, and the personal insights Monk gains during these sessions often just so happen to contribute to the solution of a crime. A central part of Carrie Mathison’s struggle in Homeland is her difficulty in obtaining and dosing the medication for her bipolar disorder without losing her job as a CIA operations officer. The list goes on. In fact, certain psychological and psychiatric phenomena and theories have become a part of popular parlance so thoroughly that they no longer require an explanation: If a scene shows a character trembling and anxious while being assaulted by disembodied, echoing voices or incongruous images in rapid succession, the audience understands without preamble that they are witnessing a reaction to a traumatic event. Similarly, a character who is shown to avoid eye contact, to shy away from touch and to follow certain rituals is quickly understood to be autistic. The recognizability of such depictions is enhanced further if a particular mental health subject receives sudden and widespread media attention, e.g. PTSD in the wake of the Vietnam and Gulf Wars, or the creation of awareness

575 Sucker Punch, dir. Zack Snyder, Warner Bros., 2011, Film.
campaigns and fundraisers by advocacy groups. Although these depictions usually have some basis in medical fact, they rarely are – as mentioned previously – completely faithful, which has given rise to the nickname “movie psychiatry” to subsume simplified, stereotypical or inaccurate depictions of mental health and health care. In fact, the acceptance of medicalized depictions of madness is so considerable that some products of popular culture invent their own scientific-sounding disorders in order to give the protagonist’s characterization and behavior (no matter how medically inaccurate) a layer of legitimacy. In the movie *Me, Myself & Irene*, the character Charlie (and his alter ego Hank) is diagnosed with “advanced delusionary schizophrenia with involuntary narcissistic rage,” an entirely fictional (not to mention incorrect) diagnosis that serves to make Charlie/Hank’s erratic behavior credible to the audience, who recognize the terminology as medical buzzwords even if they do not fully understand their meaning. In fact, the film fits into a long line of narratives about protagonists with hidden “dark sides” or “split” personalities that routinely emerge to take control of the character’s life.

Despite their near omnipresence, however, these medically influenced depictions have not sidelined or supplanted other ways of portraying madness. More than anything, they seem to co-exist and even mingle quite freely. At first glance, this may be at odds with the general acceptance of scientific explanations and the presence of technology in American daily life, which bring with them a certain demystification of complicated processes or phenomena invisible to the naked eye. Psychiatry should be no different, tasked as it is with injecting reason into the subject of unreason, shedding light on the darkness of the mind. Yet, science and storytelling possess radically different languages and have very different purposes. As Watters says, it is at best difficult for the exact, objective and ultimately “closed” (i.e. exclusive) language of science to fulfill the same human needs as the emotive, ambiguous and speculative language of fiction. This at least partially explains the two most common criticisms which scholars and advocacy groups voice in regard to the portrayal of mental illness in the media: the desire for

---


577 *Me, Myself & Irene*.

578 Schizophrenia is conflated here with MPD (Multiple Personality Disorder), itself a contested diagnosis that describes “split personalities.”

579 Particularly “evil” madness and psychiatric perspectives on madness are often paired together, even though they seem like they ought to be mutually exclusive, e.g. in the form of evil asylum escapees or psychiatrists who have become mad themselves, as seen in *Halloween* or *The Silence of the Lambs*.

580 Watters.
“juiciness” and the tendency towards exaggeration by portraying e.g. only the most severe illnesses or the most extreme symptoms. Although these practices paint a medically inaccurate picture of mental illness, they are prime ingredients for a gripping story about madness. Even the most nuanced, accurate representations are still forced to make concessions to dramatic storytelling. Such is the case in the 2001 movie *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), a film based on the life of the mathematician and Nobel Prize winner John Forbes Nash and his struggle with paranoid schizophrenia, which is often praised for its sensitive portrayal of mental illness. The film follows Nash from his life as a student at Princeton University in the 1950s and later as a lecturer at MIT, where his brilliant mathematical exploits attract the attention of the US Department of Defense. He is enlisted to help crack Soviet codes hidden in newspapers and magazines, but quickly finds himself neck-deep in a conspiracy, shadowed by secret agents, pressured by his superiors in the Pentagon, and fearing for the safety of his family. For the longest time, Nash does not realize that large parts of his life, including his work for the government and the elaborate Soviet spy plot, are little more than hallucinations born from his paranoid schizophrenia, and vehemently struggles against all those (his wife, friends and psychiatrists) who wish to make him see reality. Despite the fact that the film is groundbreaking in that it portrays a character with schizophrenia as relatively functional, successful and, above all, human, it nevertheless sacrifices medical (and real-life) accuracy for the needs of dramatic pacing and the emotional involvement of the audience. The film devotes much time to Nash’s increasingly byzantine (and increasingly threatening) hallucinations of a Soviet spy plot and the fragile happiness of his marriage, but spends comparatively little time on showing his recovery. In fact, it is not any form of medical intervention which eventually “saves” Nash, but the power of love: The pivotal scene in which Nash realizes that he is, in fact, sick, occurs when his wife Alicia, frightened for her own and their infant son’s safety, flees the house. Nash throws himself in front of Alicia’s car to prevent her from leaving, and gasps out a sudden revelation: The people from his hallucinations never seem to age, which is how he comes to understand that Alicia has been telling the truth, and only wishes for him to live with her in the “real” world. This, more than anything else, allows Nash to make a recovery, as he declares in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech at the end of the film: “I have made the most important discovery of my career. It’s only in the mysterious equations of love that any logical reasons can be found.”

---

Nash’s life, or, indeed, reflects medical accuracy – after all, it is love, not medical intervention, that allows the character to “get better.”582

Another explanation for the co-starring role that psychiatry plays in modern stories of madness is the matter of how it came to be integrated into popular culture in the first place. Much of current pop culture psychiatry owes its existence to the popularity of psychoanalysis, the famous (or infamous) school of psychotherapy founded on the ruminations of Sigmund Freud. In Revels in Madness, Thiher devotes a chapter to explaining the difference between psychiatry and psychoanalysis, and the mass appeal of the latter. To this end, Thiher contrasts the work of the 19th-century German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin, whose rigorous medical categorization of mental disorders still forms the basis of the modern classification system used by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, with the interpretative, meaning-making, and storifying approach taken by Freud:

Freud’s thought represents the return of literary ways of theorizing about madness in terms of symbols and allegories. Thus, in a very real sense, Freud’s psychoanalysis continues the work of the poets, especially the romantics, against the positivist doctors. I say this fully cognizant of the fact that doctor Freud himself started out hoping to create a branch of medical science that would ultimately be a part of neurology. But, most succinctly, Freud’s work has nothing to do with neurology.583

For evidence of the enduring popularity of Freudian thought – and, more importantly, its deep penetration of American popular consciousness – one only has to look as far as everyday language, where terms such as “oral fixation,” “Oedipus complex,” “arrested development,” “death wish,” “anal retentiveness,” “phallic symbol,” and “Freudian slip” can be found in abundance. Although Freud’s theories have fallen into disuse in medical circles, the concepts and imagery associated with psychotherapy have clearly found a home in both literary theory and narratives of popular culture, to the point where even science-fiction likes to invoke Freud to explain the compulsions of the characters’ psyche (e.g. “Phantasms”). The appeal lies in Freud’s dramatic and allegorical framing of mental disorders, which he describes as expressions of an epic struggle between conflicting impulses, unacknowledged traumas, and shameful desires. In fact, Freud draws upon stories, particularly ancient Greek mythology, to illustrate his

582 Among other things, the real John Forbes Nash suffered from auditory, not visual hallucinations – a change which can be attributed to the fact that visual hallucinations are more effective in a visual medium like film. Murray Jackson, “John Nash: Reason’s Approach to an Alternative Reality,” Creativity and Psychotic States in Exceptional People, ed. Murray Jackson and Jeanne Magagna (New York: Routledge, 2015) 17.

583 Thiher 224.
theories of the mind, and regards myths as representatives of hidden or repressed human desires. Thiher notes that Freud’s great achievement lies in granting “a patina of scientific plausibility to [the] essentially romantic defense of poetry and madness,”\textsuperscript{584} and observes that Freud’s “literary understanding of madness […] stands in opposition to the ‘scientific’ understanding of madness of Kraepelin and his successors’ work.”\textsuperscript{585} This liveliness, not to say juiciness, is largely responsible for the enduring popularity of Freudian thought and the imagery associated with psychoanalysis, to the point where both have been conflated with psychiatry and psychiatric practices in narratives of popular culture. As the notable Freud critic John Kihlstrom remarks:

\begin{quote}
In popular culture, psychotherapy is virtually identified with psychoanalysis. Freudian theory, with its focus on the interpretation of ambiguous events, lies at the foundation of “postmodern” approaches to literary criticism such as deconstruction. More than Einstein or Watson and Crick, more than Hitler or Lenin, Roosevelt or Kennedy, more than Picasso, Eliot, or Stravinsky, more than the Beatles or Bob Dylan, Freud’s influence on modern culture has been profound and long-lasting.\textsuperscript{586}
\end{quote}

Representations of madness in works of popular culture, then, are a curious mix of medical buzzwords, Freudian imagery, associations with passion, darkness, loss of control, evil, and supernatural forces. A perfect example of this amalgamation of vastly different perspectives on madness (and the chaos that results from it) can be found in the 2000 film \textit{The Cell}, which revolves around a revolutionary piece of technology created by the character of Catherine Deane, a psychologist, and her team: a virtual reality device which allows a doctor to explore the subconscious mind of a comatose or catatonic patient in hopes of awakening them. Deane’s skills are put to the test when she is asked by the FBI to enter the mind of Carl Strahger, a comatose serial killer, in order to discover the location of his latest, still living victim. The visually powerful film liberally mixes and mashes its approaches to the mind and to madness: Deane’s unconventional approach is presented as having its basis in medical fact, as she struggles to have “diving” accepted as a legitimate form of therapy in hospitals. The serial killer’s motivations are revealed to be the result of deep-seated childhood trauma, parental abuse and neglect, providing a very rudimentary pop-psychological/psychiatric pathology to explain the sadistic cruelty with which he tortures his victims.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{584} Thiher 244. \\
\textsuperscript{585} Thiher 234. \\
\end{flushright}
In contrast, the mindscapes explored by Deane are modeled on the Freudian idea of the subconscious and are filled with sexual symbolism (in one scene Deane encounters a frozen tableau of bleached, robot-like female figures posed in various sadomasochistic sexual acts), and require metaphorical actions to “unlock” (e.g. finding an object in the subconscious world which will grant access to yet deeper parts of the patient’s psyche). The killer’s subconscious turns out to be a cesspit of dark passions, warped urges and perverse sexual desires which very nearly snuff out Deane’s own sense of self, harkening back to the Romantic/Gothic ideas of madness, dark passions, and excess. Even the idea of evil madness makes an appearance – not just in the character of the serial killer and his actions, but inside his very own mind, where Deane is confronted by the “innocent” aspect of Strahger’s personality in the form of a small, terrified boy, who is hunted by the “evil” aspect in the form of a hulking, monstrous-looking adult man said to possess “no soul.”\footnote{The Cell, dir. Tarsem Singh (New Line, 2000).} Deane even attempts to remove the “evil” aspect from Strahger’s mind (which, it is implied, might cure him of his bloodlust and perversion), but does not succeed. In the end, the “innocent” aspect begs her to kill both of them, as it is the only way to stop Strahger from committing even more crimes; in fact, the “innocent” side welcomes his death as a mercy killing. In summation, it can be said that the advent of the field of psychiatry – and with it, the scientific/medical understanding of the mind and its ills – has not supplanted older (and, scientifically speaking, inaccurate) renditions of madness in American popular culture. Rather, psychiatry has only added to the many ways in which madness is portrayed in works of fiction, occasionally providing the mantle of plausibility for the kinds of madness that came before it.

6.7. Age-Old Madness in a Brand-New Medium

Although the constraints of this thesis project do not allow for an exhaustive investigation of the history and role of various portrayals of madness in American popular culture, the above points nevertheless paint a rather clear picture of the how thoroughly ingrained certain depictions of madness have become over the centuries. Even those that seem like they should have been abandoned long ago, like the presentation of madness as a divine gift or punishment, or that of madness as a sign of sin and evil, have survived the passage of time in a slightly changed form and continue to surface in narratives of popular culture to this day. In fact, even in this rational, scientifically and technologically oriented world, it seems
there exists a peculiar hunger for the dark, mysterious, metaphorical and inexplicable aspects of madness which have no place in the medical canon. These hold-outs of Gothic and medieval literature have become a staple of – among others – the modern horror genre with its hauntings and masked maniacs, endure in expected (fantasy literature) and unexpected (science fiction) places, and periodically make an appearance even in works of popular culture with a tendency towards realism and (medical) authenticity.

When the current American predilection for stories of madness is added to this remarkable endurance, it is perhaps not so strange to imagine that some, if not most, of these age-old portrayals might have also found their way into a medium that, in terms of its development and history, is barely out of its infancy. The videogame, a medium born from narratives of popular culture, has readily absorbed its tropes, stereotypes and deeply ingrained ways of depicting madness. In fact, one can go so far as to say that many of these archetypal ways of depicting madness are particularly suited to videogame design and storytelling. Not only are they recognizable from other avenues of popular culture, but their metaphorical nature and their – at least, to our modern eyes and ears – lack of (medical) realism make them ideal for a medium whose stories and play mechanics regularly venture into the realms of the strange, fantastical, implausible or outright impossible in order to sell their experiences.

The seventh and final chapter is therefore dedicated entirely to the exploration of the many ways in which videogames play with madness – and, more importantly, how they render madness playable. A close examination of several sample games published in the period from 1990 to the present will show how games have become a virtual melting pot for age-old portrayals of madness, a new medium whose narratives of madness evoke a sense of deep familiarity for American audiences. As stated in the introduction, this publication period was specifically chosen because the 1990s mark the beginning of the evolution of complex videogame narratives and the creation of vast, detailed virtual worlds. The rapid evolution of computer technology during this time period (e.g. 3-D animation, improved storage media like the CD-ROM, faster microprocessors, etc.) not only lifted most of the restrictions on game design (as explained in Chapter 3), but made games more accessible to millions of users the world over.

Chapter 7 will show that the medium of videogames acts as an incredibly productive “blender” of popular culture, mixing and re-mixing ideas, tropes and depictions of certain themes for their own purposes – something for which madness, as old and varied a theme as it is, is ideally suited. At the same time, this chapter will show that videogames are not mere imitators; they have opened up entirely new
avenues for the *experience* of madness that are unique to the medium and cannot be replicated in other narrative media to the same degree, or at all. Hence, the following section will go beyond an examination of the familiar in the unfamiliar. It will also show how videogames have made and are continuing to make use of their medium-specific characteristics in order to push the envelope for representations of madness in American popular culture.
7. Madness and Videogames

“A reflection sometimes exposes more reality than the object it echoes.”
- Cheshire Cat (Alice: Madness Returns)

How does a medium which has existed for only about half a century fit into a discourse that is thousands of years old? Or rather, how does a discourse thousands of years old fit into a medium which, during the few short decades of its existence, has mostly been regarded as a curious byproduct of the evolution of computers, a toy of questionable intellectual value, and – of course – a thing that goes beep? The previous chapters have provided a glimpse at what makes videogame narratives so fascinating yet so challenging to study: their complicated and oftentimes murky history, their ambiguous status within American (and, more generally, Western) society, the complex interplay of their various components, and their tendency to function like medial sponges – saturated with themes, images, styles, techniques, etc. from other media and the wider field of popular culture. Yet, the medium of games does much more than simply absorb and regurgitate what came before; rather, it provides entirely new avenues and means of conveying narrative which can cause even the oldest and most well-known stories to appear in a new light, or gain new dimensions. This applies to the theme of madness as well, although it should be noted that it is extraordinarily difficult to discuss its treatment, its significance and its narrative expression in videogames in general terms without approaching the point of inanity. Not only is the language of games, i.e. their narrative toolset, far less established than the language of other media, but their co-creative, experiential components – meaning that their full narrative is only brought into existence through the act of playing – is in danger of becoming lost in surface-level discussion and analysis. Nevertheless, there are some general observations to be made about how videogames approach and utilize madness.

a) Rendering Madness Playable

The first observation is that the concept of madness is often gamified, meaning that it is integrated into and expressed via the play mechanics which govern a given game. The player is provided with certain systems or functions which require the state of mind of the controlled character(s) to be taken into account. This can be something as simple as a so-called “sanity meter,” a kind of gauge or counter which

monitors the character’s mental state and requires the player to plan around it. One example is the *Shadow Hearts* series (2001-2006), which uses “sanity points” as a combat mechanic. The gothic RPG series is set in an ahistorical version of early 1900s Asia and Europe which is steeped in dark magic, populated by grotesque monsters and terrible demons. Facing these creatures in combat requires considerable mental fortitude, which is displayed as a gauge for the player to keep track of, similar to life and magic points. With each action performed in battle, this gauge depletes by a set numerical value. When the gauge reaches zero, a character will go “berserk,” meaning they buckle under the strain and begin behaving erratically, e.g. by trying to flee in a panic, wasting valuable resources, confusing allies and enemies, etc. However, the sanity meter in *Shadow Hearts* fulfills no deeper purpose; in fact, a character’s mental health is easily restored by a magic item. It is, in essence, only an interesting design quirk which acknowledges the toll of fighting against hordes of Lovecraftian nightmares, and an additional hurdle to victory which the player must take into account.

Other games integrate mechanics which affect a character’s mental state on a deeper level. For example, *Indigo Prophecy* (2005) is structured around its protagonist’s fragile mental state. The plot focuses on Lucas Kane, an ordinary IT manager at a financial institution, who suddenly begins to experience auditory and visual hallucinations. Worse still, Lucas sometimes enters a kind of trance in which he is not in control of his actions, and awakens with no memory of what has taken place in the interim. The player-as-Lucas is tasked with piecing together what truly happened during these random blackouts and discovering their underlying cause. In order to accomplish these goals, *Indigo Prophecy* requires the player to take the protagonist’s fraying sanity into consideration: Traumatic experiences, as well as frightening or stressful situations, cause Lucas’s mental health to deteriorate, but this deterioration can be counteracted through habitual or ritualistic behavior that has a calming effect, such as eating, showering, or small talk with friendly acquaintances, as well as discovering information that positively affects Lucas’s understanding of himself. If the player neglects to help the protagonist remain relatively calm and focused, the consequences are dire, as Lucas will inevitably suffer a nervous breakdown and either commit suicide or be confined to the closed ward of a psychiatric hospital. In *Indigo Prophecy*, the mechanics for staving off madness are more than an added challenge that only affects particular portions

---

589 *Shadow Hearts*, dev. Sacnoth (PlayStation 2: Midway Games, 2001); *Shadow Hearts: Covenant*, dev. Nautilus (PlayStation 2: Midway Games, 2004); *Shadow Hearts: From the New World*, dev. Nautilus (PlayStation 2: XSEED Games, 2006).

of the game (e.g. combat, as in *Shadow Hearts*); they form the core of the gameplay and become an essential part of the overall narrative, which hinges on Lucas staying sane long enough to figure out why he is going insane.

Yet another example of gamified madness can be found in 2014’s *This War of Mine* (previously mentioned in Chapter 3), which was inspired by the Siege of Sarajevo during the Bosnian War (1992-1996). The player is tasked with taking care of and organizing a group of civilian refugees who are trying to survive in an unnamed war zone until such a time as a ceasefire is declared (an event which occurs at random to emphasize the uncertainty of the refugees’ situation). In order to ensure their survival until the end of the hostilities, the player must not only direct them to collect resources like food and medicine, maintain the abandoned building which serves as a shelter, and decide whether and how to interact with NPCs, but must also pay attention and try to maintain the mental health of the group. Since danger, horror and uncertainty are omnipresent, the survivors may begin to suffer from depression and PTSD, become catatonic or suicidal, unless the player takes steps to ensure the characters’ well-being beyond keeping them nourished and well-rested. This includes providing the characters with some means of distracting themselves (such as books, music, cigarettes or alcohol), encouraging them to console one another, as well as providing them with information about the state of the fighting (e.g. by crafting a radio). In short, *This War of Mine* integrates gameplay features focused on maintaining the characters’ mental health within the larger mechanics of survival.

As these three examples show, how madness is translated and transformed into a game mechanic largely depends on the individual game and the impact it aims to achieve. Of course, providing the player with visible indicators of and systems which express madness has its pros and cons. On the one hand, the argument can be made that such mechanics run the risk of oversimplifying or even trivializing complex emotional and psychological states by compressing them into easily readable icons and gauges, thus rendering them “controllable” through a handful of input actions by the player. On the other hand, such mechanics allow the player to look out for and take care of the character(s) in various ways. Furthermore, gamified madness can serve to highlight the vulnerability of a character, emphasize the challenges they face, and inspire the player’s empathy. Particularly in older games with low-resolution graphics or in games which simply lack the financial and technological means to accurately represent all the minor changes in a

---

351 *This War of Mine*, dev. 11 Bit Studios (PC: 11 Bit Studios, 2014).
character’s mood and emotions (e.g. through realistic facial animation, voiced dialogue), the rendition of madness as a play mechanic is able to compensate for the lack of animation detail and allows the player to better understand the character’s state of mind. Finally, mechanics like sanity meters, stress indicators, higher failure rates at performing certain tasks due to the character’s deteriorated state of mind, etc., are able to keep the player in a state of tension which mirrors the character’s. After all, not every situation that is negative or stressful for a given character is automatically negative or stressful for the player. For instance, a character with social anxiety might dread having to speak to strangers, whereas the player might not share these feelings and the resultant unwellness (because the player has never experienced social anxiety before, because they are curious to see what will happen next, etc.). Game mechanics which track and render a character’s state of mind accessible can fulfill the additional function of player stressors by keeping the player alert, tense, and perhaps a little paranoid even in seemingly mundane situations. If the player can see the mounting toll which a particular action – e.g. a conversation with a stranger – takes on the character, they might start to deliberately or subconsciously play the game in such a way as to spare the character more distress. Even in the event that the player only seeks to make the game less difficult by avoiding the gameplay ramifications of a character’s deterioration (e.g. graying vision, panicked and uncontrollable behavior, etc.), they are likely to start adopting overly cautious or avoidant play behavior – i.e. they consciously or subconsciously begin to mimic and anticipate the character’s aversions or develop strategies to cope with the character’s disability, such as frequently taking breaks from a particular task in order to allow a psychologically fragile character to calm down. Although game mechanics revolving around sanity and insanity do not by default result in – or always deliberately aim for – understanding and empathy on the part of the player, they provide a unique gateway to obtaining such insights.

b) Providing an Empathetic Experience of Mental Illness

Another point is that a small but increasing number of videogames focus on the portrayal of medically recognized mental health issues. They aim at allowing players to experience what it is like to live with a particular mental illness, such as depression, PTSD, dementia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or other issues related to mental health, such as substance abuse, self-harm or domestic violence. This relatively recent trend is tied to the heightened awareness of mental illness in Western (particularly American) society, as well as the heightened sensitivity towards social issues among game creators and within online
gaming communities. Games of this kind tend to be smaller in scope, usually maintain a singular focus (the mental health issue in question), and are primarily created by indie developers wanting to push the medium to its artistic and narrative limits. At times, they are even conceived as therapeutic outlets for the developers themselves – for example, *Neverending Nightmares* (2014) is based on its lead designer’s struggle with obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression, and *Papo&Yo* (2012) is based on its creative director’s childhood memories of growing up with an alcoholic father.

“Experience games” of this kind are not typically designed to be entertaining or adventurous, but rather aim at heightening awareness of and, subsequently, sensitivity towards a given mental health issue. Despite their focus on outreach and accuracy, they do not fit within the subcategory of “educational games” mentioned in Chapter 2, as said subcategory is largely focused on conveying factual information, aid in the fulfillment of particular academic goals, and/or deliver a call to action regarding a particular sociopolitical issue (e.g. environmental pollution, vaccination, etc.). Games about the experience of madness are not animated information brochures, but aim at making the player understand and feel what it is like to live with, manage and suffer from a given mental illness. How directly or metaphorically this is conveyed depends on the individual game.

For instance, the somewhat bluntly named *Depression Quest* (2013) describes itself as an “interactive (non)fiction game” aimed at “show[ing] other sufferers of depression that they are not alone in their feelings, and to illustrate to people who may not understand the illness the depths of what it can do to people,” according to its official website. True to its genre, *Depression Quest* unfolds across slice-of-life vignettes of interactive written text accompanied by music as the nameless main character tries to go about his work, to maintain the relationships with his friends and family, and to keep the worsening

---


symptoms of his depression at bay (such as exhaustion at even the smallest tasks, the inability to concentrate, forgetfulness, insomnia, self-doubt, guilt, anxiety and the breakdown of “normal” social performance). The narration uses the second-person point-of-view (“you”) common to text-based games, which is meant to ease the transition into the experiential role-play. At the end of each vignette, the player is provided with a short list of textual choices for advancing the story, each of which has an effect on the protagonist’s mental stability and causes the story to branch out in different directions. Notably, the game also lists options which a healthy person would classify as “normal” or “sensible” and select without a second thought; however, said options are marked as unavailable. This not only sharpens the contrast between a healthy mind and a depressed mind, but also highlights that the well-meaning surface-level advice given by healthy persons is usually far from helpful. The worse the protagonist feels, the fewer options are available. For instance, when the protagonist, already taxed by the demands of his job and further exhausted by a range of deceptively small inconveniences, faces the task of finishing his work project at home, the player cannot select the option to “order some food, grab a drink, and hunker down for a night of work.” Instead, the player/protagonist must make a choice between trying to force themselves to be productive regardless of exhaustion, futilely trying to relax in front of the TV, or simply going to bed in an equally futile attempt to sleep. The healthier, common-sense options remain locked until the player manages to proceed to a point where, based on the choices they have made, the protagonist is stable enough to attempt some of these more demanding choices, although selecting them carries the risk of triggering a relapse. In this manner, Depression Quest allows the player to experience the core problem of depression: the mental and physical inability to carry on “as usual.”

In contrast to Depression Quest’s text-based narrative, the short side-scrolling game Elude (2010) prioritizes the use of game structures to render depression experiential. In fact, the game itself is meant to be a metaphor for depression. The nameless and undefined protagonist starts out in a monochrome forest where he is instructed to “renew [his] passions daily,” i.e. to try and find things which provide him with a small burst of enjoyment and energy. These things are symbolized by small gray birds hidden in the

596 Depression Quest, dev. The Quinnspiracy (Browser: The Quinnspiracy, 2013).
597 Depression Quest.
598 A side-scrolling game (often shortened to “sidescroller”) is a two-dimensional game whose play space unfolds only horizontally and sometimes vertically. Progressing through the game causes the landscape/level to scroll by from the direction the player character is facing, thus its name. Although sidescrollers are a relic from the pre-3D era of gaming (the early 1990s), they remain a popular design style in certain kinds of games.
undergrowth and among the trees. The player character must approach and “resonate” with them (by emitting a song-like tone); doing so prompts the bird to fly away in a flash of color, leaving small orbs of energy behind for the protagonist to absorb. If the player manages to gather enough energy, the character is able to climb high enough to break through the canopy of trees and float upwards into the bright blue sky, accompanied by cheerful music. Sooner or later, however, the character will run out of energy and fall back down to the forest floor. The longer the protagonist goes without “resonating” with a bird, the slower he moves and the murkier his surroundings become. Eventually, the character is grabbed and dragged underground by a writhing mass of tentacles and finds himself in a series of dark, oppressively small caves. As he attempts to find a way out, the floor begins to give way like molasses, sucking him ever deeper down, and walls begin to move to crush him. If the player is unable to discover the exit in time, the character dies, swallowed up by a bottomless pit. The metaphorical representation of depression is as straightforward as it is unconventional. *Elude* turns the tried-and-true mechanics and structure of a platform game\(^{599}\) into metaphorical elements of depression: The mostly gray-toned forest represents the default state of the depressed person, their experience of reality as dulled and leaden, whereas the colorful, cheerful sky stage represents the fleeting periods of recovery or even euphoria which an individual may experience, followed by an almost inevitable plunge back into depression, harder and deeper than before (embodied by the caves). The character himself moves sluggishly and clumsily, echoing the lack of energy that is a core component of depression, and any energy provided by the birds (representations of anything that might temporarily improve an individual’s condition or lift their spirits) evaporates all too quickly.

Moreover, the game becomes progressively more difficult – the darkness closes in more quickly, the birds appear less frequently, or if they do, they may refuse to bestow their energy, emphasizing that there are no tried and true methods for managing depression, no guaranteed ways to stave off a plunge (or rather, a drag) into the darkest emotional abyss. At the end, *Elude* presents the player with a graph of their progress through the game (i.e. how high they climbed and how far they fell), which will almost inevitably follow a downward trend. There is no way to win at *Elude* – at least not in the sense of “beating” depression. The final descent into the yawning pit – the character’s implied suicide – is inevitable as the game eventually becomes too difficult to play; in fact, even reaching the “euphoria” stage more than once is almost impossible.

---

\(^{599}\) A platform game requires the player to navigate by climbing, jumping, balancing, etc. between suspended “chunks” of the virtual world (platforms). In the case of *Elude*, these platforms are the branches of the trees, floating leaves during the sky portion and the ridges/ledges of the underground cave system.
impossible. Although the argument could be made that this outcome is too bleak, even medically inaccurate (not all depressed persons attempt suicide), it illustrates with shocking finality the inescapability of the depressed downward spiral, and implicitly encourages the player to seek help, either for themselves or an affected loved one.600

Both games, though vastly different in their style and execution, aim at capturing and rendering accessible the experience of a real-life mental illness. They do so by leveraging the medium’s greatest strengths – interactivity and the resultant immersion (see Chapter 4) – in order to allow the player a window of understanding into the workings of an illness that is difficult for sufferers to describe and even more difficult for non-sufferers to comprehend. Depression Quest does so quite demonstratively by letting the player know that the most “sensible” option is simply not available, and that the available choices will not necessarily result in a familiar outcome (e.g. if the depressed character/player decides to postpone work in order to go to bed early, this is unlikely to result in them waking up well-rested and feeling better).

Elude chooses the metaphorical path by letting the player struggle with its increasingly frustrating, slow and anxiety-inducing play mechanics in order to convey the sheer – and frequently pointless – effort a depressed person must go to in order to even maintain a state of relative “normalcy” – far from healthy or positive, but at least not in immediate danger of being consumed by their own negative feelings. Nevertheless, experience games remain modest in scope and garner a fairly small core audience, i.e. persons hoping to achieve greater understanding of certain medically recognized mental illnesses, when compared to big-budget games.

c) Using Literary Forms of Madness to Tell Stories

Generally speaking, AAA videogames – i.e. the heavily marketed, mainstream titles created on a million-dollar budget – are more attracted to madness in a literary and pop-cultural sense. As stated in Chapter 6, this kind of madness has a relatively tenuous connection to psychiatric illnesses as they are understood by 21st-century medical science – instead, it often has mythical and/or mystical dimensions, allegorical or metaphorical functions, is steeped in ambiguity, and the specific forms it takes are dictated by genre conventions and other narrative considerations. This kind of madness thrills and entertains; it frightens when it appears in the guise of Jekyll-and-Hyde characters, ax-wielding serial killers and cackling.

600 Elude, dev. GAMBIT (Browser: Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab, 2010). The game can be played at <http://gambit.mit.edu/loadgame/elude.php>. 
supervillains; it fascinates and enthralls due to its supernatural origins and otherworldly manifestations, all of which make it ideally suited to a medium whose stories tend to contain at least a few fantasy elements, if they are not outright based in the genres of fantasy or science-fiction. However, this is not to say that videogames are only interested in madness insofar as it provides cheap thrills for the audience. Videogames also make use of it to engage in or invite reflections of universal human concerns, life events and tragedies: Heroes who go mad with grief over the loss of a loved one, who struggle to hold on to their fraying sanity through a slew of bewildering and terrible experiences, who seek refuge in madness from the crushing pressure of responsibility resonate with their audience no matter the medium in which their toils and tribulations are staged. And as in any other medium, madness can function as a lens, a tool for the deconstruction of a character, idea or ideal, a mirror or a gateway to some kind of greater meaning. For example, when Cloud Strife goes mad in *Final Fantasy VII* (1997), his madness is ostensibly the result of the horrific mental and physical torture he underwent as an unwilling subject of human experimentation. However, the specific form it takes reveals far more about the character than a trauma response. In his drug- and poison-fuelled delirium, the only way for Cloud to keep going forward is to become someone else altogether, namely by adopting the personality, history and second-hand memory of his best friend. Cloud essentially becomes a new person, someone whom he has always perceived as stronger and better than himself in every way. Cloud’s madness resonates with players for many reasons, but perhaps most poignantly, it echoes, in a twisted way, the act of the player’s temporary adoption of, or melding with, a videogame character’s persona – someone else, someone superhuman, someone more suited to the role of a hero.

This final chapter will be devoted to examining the role and representation of madness in precisely these mainstream game narratives, since they not only reach more than 150 million Americans from all walks of life and of all ages (between 1.2 and 1.8 billion people worldwide), but also act like digital trawler nets in the ocean of popular culture, freely pulling in the images, styles, music and narrative tropes used in older media in order to revisit, remix and transform them. Since this chapter cannot possibly offer an examination of all representations of madness in videogames, it will instead focus on a smaller number of games published in the United States between 1990 and the present (2017). As stated previously, this time period was chosen due to the fact that videogames, largely thanks to numerous

---

602 Entertainment Software Association.
technological advances, began to develop increasingly complex stories, play mechanics and virtual worlds starting in the 1990s. These games will be examined in light of the broad categories of madness outlined in Chapter 6. This is done with the intention of establishing a solid connection between videogames and the wider pool of pop culture narratives, from which they are all too often considered separate. This is of special relevance in the field of madness studies, whose woefully few works tend to examine madness within the confines of literature, film, or works of popular culture in general – though in the latter case, videogames are notably absent from the discussion. Only by recognizing game narratives as a part of the larger set of narratives which have shaped and are shaped by American culture is it possible to arrive at a nuanced understanding of their staying power and influence.

Before proceeding with the analysis, it should be noted that there currently exist no iron-clad academic rules or guidelines for the analysis of videogame narratives, though it stands to reason that such rules might not be very useful anyway given that the medium makes use of its numerous narrative channels with such caprice, not only from one game to the next but often within one and the same title (see 4.1.1.). Nevertheless, the discussion of each game will aim to be as comprehensive as possible by considering the interplay of all its various components beyond the level of written and/or spoken text – including, but not limited to, the design and layout of its virtual world, the role of its soundtrack and musical score, the style of animation, the framing of its cut-scenes (if applicable), as well as the workings and significance of various relevant play mechanics. Only by considering the multiplicity of narrative channels in use is it possible to deliver a complete analysis of a given game narrative. Or rather, a mostly complete analysis: From an academic standpoint, the Achilles heel of any game analysis is that the game has to be played, meaning that a certain level of subjectivity – the author’s play experience – is a ghost that cannot (and arguably should not) be exorcised. In order to forestall a descent into pure subjectivity, however, the analysis will consider the actions and reactions of a hypothetical player, based on the author’s observations of a given player base and the design of the game in question (e.g. if a game encourages and rewards extensive exploration of its virtual world, it can be assumed that an average player will indulge in this activity; if a game employs techniques such as limited visibility or resources, it can be assumed that the average player will proceed with caution, etc.). This ensures a balanced perspective on the individual games which underscores the fact that a game narrative is always a collaborative effort – an interweaving of the content supplied by the developer and the actions taken by the player.

The concepts of the divine and the supernatural play a central, but paradoxically off-stage role in videogames. Although few games make it a point to comment on, criticize, or otherwise explore the concept of religion or concrete religious beliefs in any particular depth, many of them nevertheless make use of paranormal and supernatural phenomena in their mechanics (e.g. magic spells, ESP) and introduce deities from pantheons living, dead, or newly invented into the lore of their virtual worlds. This reluctance to discuss the finer points of faith is, as Julian Murdoch points out, largely due to the fact that issues pertaining to real-world belief systems and practices are already political and cultural minefields, and that games themselves are a medium that is mired in controversy and hyper-scrutinized by moralists; hence poking the proverbial hornet’s nest could negatively impact business relations and sales. Nevertheless, the medium draws on genres of literature, film, and other kinds of games which encourage their audiences to step away from reality and indulge in fictional worlds governed by a nostalgic kind of mysticism, such as the works of European and American high fantasy, low fantasy, and other forms of speculative fiction, as well as folklore and urban legends. As game developer James Wyatt explains, “Games aren’t a place where you are expected to cling to a belief in something that can’t be seen or proven. It’s a world where the power of gods is demonstrated daily. [...] Fantasy has this ability to open our eyes to the enchantment of our world, and to view real things with more wonder.”

The supernatural and fantastical are even more strongly present in games primarily or entirely developed in Japan, whose rich folklore – shaped variously by Shintoist, Buddhist and Taoist beliefs and traditions – has been a central motif in the country’s art and literature for centuries. Japanese-produced videogames draw on these traditions with their manifold spirits, ghosts, demons and deities, liberally reinterpreting and combining them with myths and supernatural creatures from other cultures. For example, the Shin Megami Tensei series of role-playing games features a broad mix of deities, demons, fairies and spirits from various Asian, European and

---

603 Julian Murdoch, “God’s PR Problem: The Role of Religion in Videogames,” Gamespy, 13 Jan. 2010, 31 Aug. 2017 <http://www.gamespy.com/articles/105/1059455p1.html>. For instance, the Assassin’s Creed series, which is set in historical periods and locations of intense religious conflict such as the Middle East during the medieval crusades or Renaissance Italy, and whose protagonists are followers of an almost atheistic set of beliefs (the titular creed), is prefaced by a disclaimer which carefully emphasizes its status as a work of fiction and as the creation of a “multicultural team of various faiths and beliefs” (Assassin’s Creed).

604 James Wyatt, qtd. in Murdoch.

Native American cultures as supernatural allies or enemies to the human protagonists. US-American players have been exposed to this modern kind of “Night Parade of One Hundred Demons” at least since the North American Videogame Crash of 1983, which played a significant role in opening the market to Japanese games (cf. Chapter 3), and are thus familiar with its quirks and conventions. Indeed, many Japanese games already draw heavily on American popular culture to shape their narrative experiences. In his analysis of “Eastern” survival horror games, for example, Picard argues that these games are not only influenced by the literary, cinematic and cultural traditions of their country of origin, but that many of their conventions, settings, etc., are inspired by works of contemporary American horror cinema, popular culture, as well as Lovecraftian and Gothic literature.606 One prominent example of this mix of media influences is the Silent Hill series (1999–present607). Each game in the series is set in the titular Silent Hill, a fictional resort town in rural Maine, which, unbeknownst to its residents, possesses a mysterious power that calls out to some of its visitors. Due to its sordid history as a Native American burial ground, a penal colony, a base of operations for a Satanic cult, and a site of two major epidemics which claimed hundreds of lives, the modern Silent Hill straddles different planes of reality, each of which possesses a distinct “face”: the real world, where it exists as a harmless resort town, the fog world, in which the town appears as a dilapidated, abandoned shadow of itself, cloaked in a perpetual, nigh impenetrable fog, and the “otherworld,” whose nightmarish, distorted appearance depends on the individual visitor’s deepest, darkest inner conflicts. The longer a visitor stays in either of the two alternate realities, the closer they are driven towards a complete mental breakdown by manifestations originating from their own psyche. The mysterious power of the town is never fully explained, yet the hows and whys of Silent Hill are ultimately irrelevant. The true power of the town lies in its ability to act as both a lens and a catalyst, laying bare the characters’ minds and becoming their very own personal mount of purgatory, where they can either confront their inner demons (turned into “outer” demons by the town in the form of monsters) and find a renewed sense of self which allows them to escape Silent Hill, or succumb to the psychological onslaught and descend into the depths of madness, thus forfeiting their lives.

606 Picard 98. This, incidentally, ties back into the argument made in Chapter 3 of this thesis: It is not possible to draw rigid distinctions in the analysis of videogames according to their country of origin, not only because their production and distribution processes are so complex, but because their very themes, imagery and storytelling have become transnational.

607 The first four titles in the series (1999–2004) were created by the in-house “Team Silent” of the Tokyo-based developer/publisher Konami, but the series has since “migrated” across the Pacific into the hands of American, British and Czech game studios.
Everything about the basic premise of the series harkens back to 19th-century American Gothic fiction with its haunted mansions, inexplicable occurrences, walking corpses, human darkness, torment and, of course, madness. In fact, broadly speaking, one could say that survival horror games share some of the basic goals with Gothic fiction, since they aim to deliver visceral narrative experiences which frighten, repulse, distress or otherwise unsettle the player by confronting them with macabre imagery, toying with their sensory perceptions, and forcing them to question their sense of (in-game) reality. This is achieved through the use of claustrophobic, labyrinthine virtual environments in which it is easy to lose one’s sense of time and direction, less than ideal visual conditions such as darkness, blurriness, unusual angles and perspectives, and an emphasis on the player character’s physical frailty (e.g. by providing limited resources such as healing items, favoring defensive play strategies, etc.). Hence, survival horror games often contain narrative themes which complement this sense of unreality and vulnerability, such as addiction, memory loss, hallucinations and nightmares. Their protagonists, caught in scenarios of Gothic dread and terror, are especially susceptible to madness.

In particular, *Silent Hill 2* (2001), which is often credited as a defining influence on the survival horror genre, embraces American Gothic madness in order to weave its story of a love gone wrong. The player assumes the role of James Sunderland, a widower, who has been called to the town of Silent Hill by a letter from his wife Mary, who passed away due to an illness three years prior to the events of the game. Once he enters the town, determined to uncover the truth behind the letter, James is confronted not with the peaceful romantic retreat from his memories, but with a ghost town cloaked in almost impenetrable fog. To make matters worse, untold numbers of monstrous creatures roam the streets, attacking unsuspecting intruders. Entirely unbeknownst to James (and the player), he has been drawn into an alternate plane of existence where his deepest fears, desires and secrets are dredged from his subconscious, influencing everything he sees and hears. As his visit to Silent Hill steadily turns into a dangerous journey of self-discovery, James is forced to come to terms with a terrible truth he has done his best to forget: Mary has only been dead for a few days, murdered by her own husband who sought to free both his wife and himself from the living hell of a terminal disease.

*Footnote:* For instance, in *Among the Sleep* (2014), the player assumes the role of a two-year-old child whose nighttime home is plagued by threatening supernatural forces. The darkened rooms are made more unsettling by the fact that a toddler’s field of vision, perspective and sense of scale differ from an adult’s. *Among the Sleep*, dev. Krillbite Studio (PC/Windows: Krillbite Studio, 2014).
Silent Hill 2's homage to Gothic frights and hauntings is most obvious in its visual and sound design, which evoke an atmosphere of unreality, claustrophobia, and foreboding similar to the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe, such as “Ligeia” and “The Fall of the House of Usher.” The buildings speak of abandonment and neglect, covered in peeling paint, graffiti, mold and unidentifiable stains. The tourist shops and diners are either closed or in disarray, mired in dirt and littered with detritus like old newspapers, broken furniture, and forgotten personal effects. Street signs and construction equipment can be seen rusting in the damp air, cars have been left by the roadside as if their owners simply disappeared from behind the wheel. The visual desolation is enhanced by the silence which dominates long stretches of the game. With the exception of cut-scenes and enemy encounters, the only consistent sources of noise are the protagonist’s footsteps and breathing, which echo loudly in the emptiness of the deserted town, thereby creating a sense of entrapment and suffocation even in wide, open spaces like avenues and plazas. In addition, visibility is severely limited throughout the game: As mentioned above, the streets of Silent Hill are shrouded in a thick, unrelenting fog, while the building interiors are kept in near-total darkness due to a lack of electricity, barricaded exits and window panes rendered opaque by dust and grime. Even a flashlight which James finds during the exploration of the town is barely able to improve this handicap, its feeble cone of light reaching no further than two or three feet into the shadows. This feature, too, can be traced back to Gothic tales wherein nighttime, fog, thunderstorms and other extreme weather phenomena help to foster an atmosphere of gloom and anxiety, and evoke the presence of the supernatural. For example, in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the weather – “a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens” – not only enhances the sense of entrapment, stagnation and decay which surrounds the ancestral Usher mansion and the family itself, but acts as a portent of Madeline Usher’s rising from the grave: Her return is accompanied by a fierce storm and an inexplicable glowing mist – “a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation” – which covers the grounds, bathing them in an eerie light. Similarly, in

---


612 Poe 22.
Wieland, Clara’s father is burned to death by a “cloud impregnated by light” which defies rational scientific explanation. In Silent Hill 2, the fog and darkness serve the additional purpose of enhancing the design principle of “simultaneous attraction and repulsion” which defines its virtual environments. The town and its buildings are structured like labyrinths, full of locked doors and closed-off roads which require the player to explore everywhere in order to discover the path forward. Since the player is unable to see clearly or far, they are compelled to approach objects and locations in order to be able to scrutinize them (attraction), yet what emerges from the fog or darkness as they draw close can be unsettling or even threatening (repulsion).

Yet, Silent Hill 2 is much more than a virtual haunted house which draws on well-established imagery and narrative conventions in order to frighten and disturb. It also fully embraces the ambiguous and transgressive nature of Gothic storytelling. One of the central aspects of Gothic fiction is the uncertainty which arises from the blurring of boundaries between “verifiable reality and modes of perception gone awry” (present, for example, in the apparent revival and transformation of the narrator’s dead wife in “Ligeia,” which may or may not be a result of the narrator’s opium-shrouded grief, in the voices whispering through the halls and grounds of the Wieland estate, which may or may not be fabrications of Carwin’s ventriloquism, or in the ghostly visitations in The Turn of the Screw, which may or may not be imaginings from the Governess’s disturbed mind). What makes the narrative experience of Silent Hill 2 so effective and memorable is that the game crafts an elaborate illusion of sanity around its protagonist, James Sunderland, which is then slowly but systematically undermined, cast into doubt, and eventually shattered. In addition, the game is laden with symbolism and visual metaphor which can only be understood in hindsight. Only when James is finally able to realize the truth about his relationship with Mary is the player given the means to understand that everything up until this moment – every environment, creature, line of dialogue and action – has been colored by or is an expression of James’s fragile state of mind.

613 Brockden Brown, Wieland 14.
614 Making of Silent Hill 2.
7.1.1. Building a Mystery: Ambiguity and the Illusion of Sanity

Pivotal to this illusion is the presentation of James as an ordinary man who has stumbled upon an extraordinary town. Mild-mannered and soft-spoken, he is well aware of the inherent ridiculousness of his quest – as he states, “a dead person can’t write a letter”\textsuperscript{616} – but, as a grieving widower, he is nevertheless driven to cling to the fool’s hope of being reunited with his wife. Although James is visibly disturbed and afraid of the eldritch abominations lurking in the town – his first encounter with one of the writhing, predatory monsters ends with him bludgeoning the creature to death in a fit of panic – his decision to proceed onward can easily be written off as a result of wishful thinking and morbid curiosity.

Furthermore, the few human characters whom James meets during his exploration of the town are presented as obviously strange, suspicious, or “unhinged,” which cements the illusion of James as a sane person and reliable narrator. For example, Angela Orosco, with whom James first crosses paths in the town graveyard at the beginning of the game, is a skittish young woman prone to panic attacks and self-effacing behavior. Eddie Dombrowski, an overweight, boyish young man whom James meets as he is vomiting into a toilet next to a dead body, likewise inspires unease when he repeatedly and with increasing agitation insists that he “didn’t kill anybody,”\textsuperscript{617} despite the fact that James does not accuse him of any wrongdoing. The meeting with Laura, an eight-year-old orphaned runaway, is baffling in its unexpectedness, since the little girl appears completely unconcerned by the presence of monsters and is dismissive of the adults’ worries for her safety. By far the strangest and most unsettling character is Maria, a flirtatious, provocative woman whom James encounters at one of the locations he used to visit with his wife. Not only does Maria resemble Mary so closely that even James is momentarily deceived (“You could be her twin. Your face, your voice... Just your hair and clothes are different”\textsuperscript{618}), but her innuendo-laden remarks and cryptic insinuations seem tailored to upset and confuse him. Within only a minute of their acquaintance, she begins to tease James about the uncanny likeness (“I don’t look like a ghost, do I?”\textsuperscript{619}), makes disparaging comments about his marriage (“So, the hotel was your ‘special place,’ huh? I’ll bet it was”\textsuperscript{620}), manipulates him into allowing her to come along by appealing to his guilt and sense of chivalry (“You were just gonna leave me here? [...] With all these monsters around? [...] I’m all alone here.

\textsuperscript{616} \textit{Silent Hill 2}, dev. Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo (PlayStation 2: Konami, 2001).
\textsuperscript{617} \textit{Silent Hill 2}.
\textsuperscript{618} \textit{Silent Hill 2}.
\textsuperscript{619} \textit{Silent Hill 2}.
\textsuperscript{620} \textit{Silent Hill 2}.
Everyone else is gone… I look like Mary, don’t I?”

Although these characters strengthen the player’s impression of the protagonist as an ordinary, sane individual by virtue of their strangeness, they also undermine this very impression by deliberately or accidentally calling into question James’s truthfulness, sincerity and his very grasp on reality. For example, when Angela warns James of the dangers lurking in the town at the beginning of the game, James states that he plans to venture into Silent Hill regardless because “I guess I really don’t care if it’s dangerous or not.” At first, this statement can be understood in a number of ways, ranging from bravado to single-minded determination. However, a second meeting later in the game suggests another, bleaker interpretation. While trying to find his way through a derelict apartment complex, James stumbles upon Angela again. The troubled young woman is curled up on the dirty floor of an apartment unit in front of a large mirror, clutching a butcher knife and undergoing suicidal ideation. Concerned, James attempts to dissuade her from harming herself, which results in the following exchange:

James: Angela… okay. I don’t know what you’re planning… But there’s always another way.

Angela: Really? But… You’re the same as me. It’s easier just to run. Besides, it’s what we deserve.

James: (haltingly) No… I’m not like you.

Angela: (mockingly) Are you afraid? (flinches) I—I’m sorry.

Although it remains ambiguous whether Angela is merely making unfounded assumptions or whether she intuitively recognizes a similar kind of torment in James’s countenance, the conversation retroactively colors James’s earlier disregard for danger, leaving the player to wonder whether he might be seeking death, as well.

The two characters most central to dispelling the illusion of the protagonist’s sanity, however, are Laura and Maria. Laura, the capricious eight-year-old girl, harbors an inexplicable grudge against James, playing pranks on and insulting him at every turn. During their first meeting, she darts out of hiding to kick away a key James is struggling to reach through an iron gate, stomps on his hand and runs away,
giggling at his pain and frustration. When James crosses paths with her again, Laura reacts with open hostility and refuses to answer any questions because, as she states, “You didn’t love Mary anyway.”

Before James can recover from his shock and demand an explanation, she runs away once again. This sets a pattern for the remainder of the game, as James spends much time searching for Laura, partly out of concern for her safety, and partly in order to uncover the strange girl’s connection to his late wife. Every time they meet, Laura reveals a little more information about her acquaintance with Mary, which directly or indirectly contradicts James’s own story. For instance, James insists that his wife passed away three years ago, yet Laura claims to have befriended Mary during a hospital stay only one year ago; James’s constant thoughts of Mary and his desperate hope-against-hope to find her in Silent Hill paint a picture of a grieving, devoted husband, yet Laura’s anger at him is motivated by the belief that James was not “nice” to Mary, implying that there may have been a dark side to their marital relationship.

While this alone would only allow for the assumption that one character is lying, James does not react like a man who is certain of his memories: At first, he protests these contradictions weakly (“But last year, Mary was already…”), but soon descends into outright confusion when pondering the inconsistencies (“Mary… Did you really die three years ago…?”).

Another, much stronger hint that James’s perception and memory are anything but reliable is delivered in his interactions with Maria, whose overly familiar attitude and constant insinuations cast the light of suspicion not just on herself, but also on James: Is Maria simply making very accurate (and needlessly upsetting) guesses about a man she has only just met, or does she know things about him that James is unwilling to admit? In addition, Maria undergoes drastic changes in mood without warning and without any apparent reason, behaving in ways that are inconsistent with her femme fatale personality. At times, she addresses James as “honey” and worries about his well-being like a loving wife. At other times, she reacts with explosive anger or childish neediness, demanding James’s support and affection (“You don’t sound very happy to see me. I was almost killed back there! […] All you care about is that dead wife of yours!”; “Don’t ever leave me alone! You’re supposed to take care of me!”). Yet whenever James

---

625 Silent Hill 2. Laura’s accusation is echoed, more subtly, by Maria’s teasing, which substantiates the suspicion that James may not be entirely truthful about his devotion to his wife.

626 Silent Hill 2.

627 Silent Hill 2.

628 Silent Hill 2.

629 Silent Hill 2.
remarks upon her strange behavior or their conversation is otherwise interrupted, Maria instantly reverts to her seductive, confident self, acting as if nothing has happened or outright denying any knowledge that the exchange has ever taken place. These scenes enhance the creeping feeling of unease and unreality, prompting the player to wonder whether Maria is simply toying with James for some unknown end, or whether James is suffering from delusions and subconsciously inventing moments of intimacy with a stranger who resembles his wife.

By far the most unsettling clue about James’s questionable state of mind is given when Maria dies an abrupt, violent death right in front of his eyes. During their exploration of a ruined hospital, the pair are suddenly beset by Pyramid Head – an undefeatable monster with the body of a man dressed in a butcher’s smock and a large red, pyramidal slab of metal in place of a head, who terrorizes even the terrors of Silent Hill and seems to stalk the protagonist.\footnote{Earlier in the game, James encounters Pyramid Head as he is sexually assaulting two Mannequins, monsters composed of two conjoined sets of feminine hips and legs. \textit{Silent Hill 2}.} They flee towards an open elevator, but the doors draw shut as soon as James enters. Despite his efforts to pry them open, they do not budge more than a few inches, leaving James to watch helplessly as Maria is stabbed to death by the grotesquerie. Yet, only a short while later, James (and the player) is given cause to doubt this chain of events. While traversing a maze underneath Silent Hill’s historical prison, James enters a cell compound and comes face to face with Maria on the other side of the bars – healthy, whole, and seemingly without memory of the entire incident:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{James:} You’re alive! Maria...! I thought that thing killed you...! Are you hurt bad?!
\textbf{Maria:} Not at all, silly.
\textbf{James:} …Maria? That thing… it stabbed you. There was blood everywhere.
\textbf{Maria:} Stabbed me? What do you mean?
\textbf{James:} It chased us to the elevator. And then…
\textbf{Maria:} James, what are you talking about?
\textbf{James:} Just before! Don’t you remember?
\textbf{Maria:} James, honey… Did something happen to you? After we got separated in that long hallway? Are you confusing me with someone else? (laughs) You were always so forgetful… Remember that time in the hotel?
\textbf{James:} Maria…?
\textbf{Maria:} You said you took everything, but you forgot that videotape we made.
I wonder if it’s still there…
\textbf{James:} How do you know about that! Aren’t you Maria?
\end{quote}
Maria: (coldly) I’m not your Mary.

James: So you’re Maria?!

Maria: I am... if you want me to be.

James: (desperately) All I want from you is an answer!

Maria: (reaching through the bars to stroke his cheek) It doesn’t matter who I am...

I’m here for you, James.⁶³¹

Maria’s “death” only strengthens the impression that James’s mind may be playing tricks on him, since her “survival” is a physical impossibility. At the very least, it makes apparent that there is a substantial difference between James’s reality and Maria’s. In a final, unsettling twist, Maria is found dead again soon afterwards: By the time James discovers a way to free her from the prison cell, she is no longer alive, bludgeoned to death by an unseen enemy, an incident which causes the player to wonder whether James, weighed down by guilt over his failure to save her, has simply hallucinated the reunion. The haze of uncertainty only begins to lighten and disperse once James finally doubts himself enough to become receptive to the truth – a truth which he has buried in the furthest recesses of his own mind.

7.1.2. Rising from the Grave: Silent Hill as a Metaphor of Madness

Madness in Silent Hill 2 functions as both the refuge of a mind strained and hurt past all endurance, and as the very thing which prevents the protagonist from coming to terms with his deed and his true self. Delusion and hallucination allow James to cut away all the aspects of himself which are frightening, alien or undesirable and to confine them to the coffin of forgetfulness. Just as Roderick Usher literally entombs his sister Madeleine, the “source” of his torment and shameful urges, alive, James Sunderland tries with all his might to figuratively bury the primary source of his own misery: himself. It takes the mysterious power of a Gothic town to chip away at the locks which are keeping this coffin tightly closed, and to eventually wrench off the lid in order to allow James to come face to face with the darkest parts of himself.

In a scene filled with symbolic imagery, James finally makes his way to the hotel room in which the couple stayed during their visit, and where they accidentally left behind a videotape filled with holiday memories. When James attempts to replay the tape in order to relive these moments of happiness, the video of married bliss suddenly cuts off, overwritten by entirely different footage which no one could have possibly recorded. The soundless, static-laden images show Mary lying in her bedroom, weakened by

⁶³¹ Silent Hill 2.
her long illness. James sits down at her side, briefly bending over to kiss her forehead, before reaching for something out of frame. Although the video becomes so scrambled and distorted as to be almost unintelligible, split-second flashes of flailing limbs and shadows in the monochrome chaos allow for the conclusion that James is smothering Mary with a pillow. In essence, the videotape externalizes the process of realization which is taking place within James’s mind by condensing three years of twofold suffering into approximately one minute and fifteen seconds of film. The memories of Mary as James has tried to preserve her – healthy, vibrant and joyful – are erased, overwritten by memories of Mary, emaciated and too sick to move, just as Mary herself has been erased and overwritten by the disease.\textsuperscript{632}

This revelation, which is accompanied by James sitting motionless in a chair, head bowed and silent for almost a full minute as one of the rare musical pieces of the soundtrack plays, marks the turning point of the game in two important, related respects. It begins the process of “unearthing” James Sunderland, of bringing to light aspects of his personality and life story which the protagonist has managed to bury so deeply as to forget them almost completely. In fact, although the trauma and guilt of the murder are implied to be the reason for James’s selective amnesia, it is noteworthy that he has not simply substituted memories of Mary’s recent, violent death at his own hands with an illusion of Mary’s recent, peaceful passing. Rather, he has managed to convince himself, as he states at the beginning of the game, that “Mary died of that damn disease three years ago,”\textsuperscript{633} thereby burying the past three years of his own life. James’s subconscious attempt to erase the past does not solely stem from the pain and helplessness of watching his wife waste away over the course of months and years, but is also motivated by the transformation he himself underwent during that time, becoming a stranger to himself in the process. The three missing years consist of a veritable tug-of-war between conflicting emotions, desires and impulses – loving yet resenting his wife, wishing to be given more time with her yet yearning to finally be free of the burden of caring for her, remaining devoted yet brimming with unfulfilled emotional and sexual needs, caring for and supporting her yet feeling suffocated by the vise of duty and obligation. By piecing together snippets of information gleaned from character conversations, descriptions of inventory items, letters and James’s responses to certain prompts throughout the game, the player is able to form a fragmentary picture of the couple’s marriage falling apart under the strain of terminal illness. For example,

\textsuperscript{632} Mary: “Between the disease and the drugs, I look like a monster. [...] I’m no use to anyone. I’ll be dead soon, anyway. Maybe today, maybe tomorrow... It’d be easier if they’d just kill me” (Silent Hill 2).

\textsuperscript{633} Silent Hill 2.
an aural flashback reveals that Mary underwent a drastic change in personality as her illness progressed, becoming volatile and verbally abusive towards her husband, violently rejecting his affection and care in one moment yet begging for it in the next. Hints at the extent and effect of his wife’s abuse can be seen in James’s behavior towards other characters in the game, which is defined by meekness, uncertainty and passive acceptance in the face of their demands or hostile behavior. When the player examines bottles of alcohol in a deserted night club, James remarks that he used to “drink a fair bit,” implying a descent into alcoholism. Laura’s testimony as well as Mary’s letters and answering machine messages also indicate that James visited her less and less in an attempt to escape the inevitability of the situation (“Do you hate me? Is that why you won’t come?”). Although Silent Hill 2 avoids giving definitive reasons as to James’s attempt at self-erasure, one can infer it to be at least partially motivated by guilt, shame and disgust at these terrible urges and dark thoughts, none of which fit the ideal of a “good person” or a “good husband.” In essence, James has metaphorically buried himself alive, seeking refuge in delusion in order to avoid facing the stranger he has become.

Furthermore, the unearthing of the protagonist’s truth retroactively affects the player’s experience of the game, allowing them to recognize that Silent Hill is much more than a stage set for one man to lose his mind. Rather, James has been mad – “lost” to himself – from the beginning, and the very way in which the game is played (i.e. its mechanics and level design) can be understood as a metaphor of the protagonist’s internal struggle. Much of the game is spent tentatively exploring the strange surroundings, slowly groping one’s way through the fog and darkness for clues, just as James is tentatively groping his way towards an understanding of himself and his own truth. The labyrinthine layout of the town and its accessible locales likewise holds much greater significance than an elaborate obstacle course which merely exists to puzzle and challenge the player. Silent Hill, with its thick fog and innumerable barricaded doors, closed roads, cul-de-sacs, sinkholes, collapsed architecture and other barriers, mirrors James’s frayed mind, which is also full of “holes” and “dead ends,” i.e. self-inflicted gaps in his memory, aborted thoughts and realizations, and no clear sight of himself. The path the-player-as-James must take through the town is

---

634 Notably, this subservient attitude is paired with considerable empathy and an almost compulsive desire to help. Throughout the game, James makes multiple abortive, yet sincere attempts to support the other characters in their distress by offering to listen to them, worrying about their well-being and trying to protect them, despite their brief acquaintance and his own need of assistance.

635 Silent Hill 2.

636 Silent Hill 2.
long, winding and anything but accessible – a location of interest might only be half a block away in theory, yet all but the most obscure routes to it have been cut off. For example, in order to reach the lookout point which James remembers as his wife’s favorite place in town, the player must first locate a key on a dead body lying in an alley, locate the apartment building it belongs to, traverse its length and breadth in order to find several objects which open the passage to yet another closed-off apartment building, and only there is it possible to find an exit which leads to the intended destination. Similarly, James’s way towards the truth is anything but straightforward, hindered by self-deception and ambiguous or uncooperative characters, yet he is steadily urged towards it by the irrepressible need to know.

Finally, the monsters populating the town are symbolic in their function as well as their physical appearance. If the journey through Silent Hill is interpreted as a metaphor for James’s struggle towards inevitable self-awareness, the monsters can be seen as manifestations of uncomfortable truths, stray memories or moments of clarity in the haze of James’s mind. Just like repressed thoughts and memories, the monsters tend to appear with little to no warning, creeping up on James/the player from blind spots and hidden corners, rising from the floors or dropping down from ceilings. The monsters’ physical appearances fully establish the connection between them and James’s disarrayed mind. The majority of creatures in Silent Hill 2 possess vaguely human characteristics in order to lead the player into initially mistaking them as such.637 These distorted, disfigured or otherwise malformed humanoid bodies are much more than simple sources of intrigue and horror meant for the player, since they are also physical representations of the protagonist’s mental state. Many of the monsters exhibit signs of torment, captivity and/or restraint, indicators of the living hell that used to be the couple’s marriage for the past three years. For example, the very first monster James/the player encounters is a bipedal creature bound in a full-body straitjacket made of its own skin. Unable to move its arms and do more than stagger around on unsteady feet, it resorts to spraying James with a foul-colored, acidic mist from its sole facial feature – a vertical zipper. Although it is described as a “manifestation of James’s suffering”638 in the official art book to the Silent Hill series, the creature can also be interpreted as an embodiment of James’s feelings of being restricted by and shackled to his wife, or of being silenced and suffocated, or even as his impression of Mary’s illness and pain. Other monsters possess prominent, highly sexualized female features, such as the Bubblehead Nurse, a female-bodied creature wearing a blood-stained, highly revealing nurse uniform,

637 Making of Silent Hill 2.
which frequently ambushes James in groups and attacks relentlessly. In retrospect, this creature is indicative of James’s anxieties about Mary’s hospitalization as well as his feelings of sexual deprivation. In addition, the creature’s faceless head is wrapped tightly in a sheet of vinyl, evoking the metaphorical feeling of suffocation as well as the method of murder. Still other creatures are indicative of the abuse James suffered, such as the Flesh Lip, an amorphous mass of flesh and human limbs chained to a bed frame which swings down from the ceiling and attempts to strangle James with its legs. A pair of prominent feminine lips at its underside is constantly in motion, emitting shrieks and groans, thus evoking Mary’s hate-filled tirades and insults.639

Hints as to the exclusivity of these manifestations are given early on in the game, as the majority of the characters cannot see the specters which haunt James, and vice versa. Laura, whose lack of mental burdens leads her to experience the town as peaceful and non-threatening, offers the strongest clue that Silent Hill does not treat all its visitors the same. Both Angela and Eddie admit to seeing monsters, but are so vague in their initial descriptions that the player has no reason to assume them to be different from the monsters which beset James. However, as the player discovers clues regarding the personal history of these characters, it slowly becomes clear that their torment must be vastly different from James’s own – and possibly much worse, since neither Angela nor Eddie are cushioned by the soft blanket of delusion. Eddie, a victim of bullying from a loveless home, is implied to be confronted by manifestations of his tormentors.640 Every time James happens across him, Eddie is sitting close to a corpse and offers increasingly transparent, incoherent justifications for its presence – at one point, he even blurts out a confession (“That guy… he– he had it coming! I didn’t do anything. He just came after me! Besides, he was making fun of me with his eyes! Like that other one…”641) only to retract it a second later by claiming that he was “just jokin’.”642 Given that Eddie is likely beset by an endless parade of copies of his real-world abusers, he grows ever more unstable and eventually attacks James in a fit of paranoid rage, thus forcing James to kill him in self-defense. Angela, who suffered through years upon years of sexual abuse at the hands of her father and was blamed for it by her mother, is implied to be haunted by manifestations of her rapist, which accounts for her frequent panic attacks and suicidal tendencies. In fact, a meeting with

639 Book of Lost Memories 49.

640 Eddie’s reason for being drawn to Silent Hill is implied to be a physical altercation with one of his bullies, after which he fled his hometown to evade the police.

641 Silent Hill 2.

642 Silent Hill 2.
Angela later in the game makes the personalized nature of the monsters explicit. James hears the young woman scream in anguish and finds her trying to fend off a monster whose body takes the shape of a muscular man forcing another human silhouette down onto a bed-like surface. To Angela, the creature presumably manifests as her own father, as evidenced by her cries of “No, daddy! Please! Don’t!” yet James only sees the flesh-covered tableau of rape. The fact that he is capable of seeing the creature – a manifestation of another character’s mind – at all is likely due to the fact that he has come to empathize with Angela and has gained some insight into her traumatic past.

Yet, the true extent of James’s own personal hell is only made explicit close to the very end, when he once again comes face to face with Pyramid Head, who has doggedly trailed him throughout the game. This time, the invincible creature appears as a pair of executioners who have strapped Maria – once more miraculously alive – to a torture rack. Before James can rush to her aid, one of the monsters drives its spear into her back, killing her once again. However, this brutal scene at last allows James to realize that he has been fighting against the buried parts of himself all along. Both characters are, in fact, also manifestations of his own repressed fears and desires. Pyramid Head, with his muscular physique, inhuman strength and raw (sexual) brutality, acts as an amalgamation of various aspects of James’s madness: his feelings of emasculation, repressed anger, and his capacity for violence (i.e. Mary’s murder), but also his guilt and his desire to be punished. Maria, on the other hand, represents his longing for his wife, her likeness distorted by his sexual frustration. In fact, Pyramid Head’s duplicate presence in this final encounter may be a result of James’s confused feelings regarding Mary and Maria, as well as the fact that both died – directly and indirectly – as a result of his actions. Faced with this symbolic scene, James finally realizes that the cycle of senseless violence is perpetrated by none other than himself: “I was weak. That’s why I needed you… Needed someone to punish me for my sins. But that’s all over now… I know the truth… Now it’s time to end this.” Since James is finally capable of moving from a tentative acceptance of his deed to actively taking responsibility for it, the cycle is broken. The two Pyramid Heads cease their assault and instead impale themselves on their own weapons, their arms spread wide in a

---

643 Silent Hill 2.
644 Notably, not even this manifestation of James’s unfulfilled desire and longing is free of the trauma of Mary’s illness. For instance, during the exploration of the municipal hospital, Maria begins coughing (an early symptom of Mary’s condition) and expresses a sudden desire to rest. Visibly exhausted, she swallows pills from a medicine bottle with the flimsy excuse of suffering from a hangover, and asks James to return for her later. Silent Hill 2.
645 Silent Hill 2.
gesture of surrender. With the last vestiges of delusion bleeding out in front of him, the town is finally able to manifest James’s true desire: the chance to properly speak to Mary one last time.

7.2. The Disease of Villains

As discussed in the previous chapter, there exists a long and dubiously proud tradition of associating madness with evil – corruption, crime, immorality, intemperance and generally reprehensible behavior – whether in fiction or in reality, and videogames continue this tradition by filling the ranks of their antagonists with “madmen” and “homicidal maniacs.” In fact, these mad villains are not seldom more memorable and more recognizable than their respective protagonist counterparts, a trend which is hardly unique to videogames. As Wahl observes in the context of early 20th-century film in particular, the erratic, amoral and thus transgressive behavior of mad antagonists is what captivates and thrills the audience: “Such unstable villains were sometimes more famous than the heroes of those early movies, and many a patron eagerly attended the matinees that promised some doctor or scientist who had dared to tinker with nature and had lost his sanity in the process.”

In general, videogame antagonists are designed to be highly memorable and instantly recognizable, both in terms of physical appearance and in terms of their behavior. In the vast majority of games, the central element of the challenge (see: 4.2.2.) takes the form of a conflict – a physical and/or intellectual struggle between the player character and one or several antagonistic non-player characters. Hence, by default, the villain must be someone the player wants to confront and eventually overcome/defeat at the climax of the game. In the establishment of the villain, madness serves a trifold purpose. First, it can, and often does, enhance the visual recognition value of the antagonistic character. Especially in older games of the pre-3D era (mid-1990s), when storage space and graphical representation were severely limited and every pixel was vital to expressing central aspects of the game and its characters (i.e. personality, mood, affiliation, etc.), stereotypical signs of madness which had already been popularized by other media were often used to set the villain(s) apart from the remaining cast of characters, for example by giving them obvious physical tics, exaggerated gestures and poses, as well as other behavior which is regarded as unusual (e.g. sexual fetishes). These exaggerations help to enhance the villain’s

646 Wahl 3.
647 Sheldon 74-77.
“otherness,” to set them apart from the general sea of NPCs and especially the protagonist(s). Second, madness is employed as an explanation for the villain’s amoral and/or criminal behavior, plans and deeds, particularly when said plans and deeds lack a clear end goal, do not follow a logical course, or spring from a base or unrealistic desire such as world domination/destruction. Depending on the level of seriousness and realism which a videogame story strives to achieve, the madness exhibited and the crime(s) committed by the villain are rendered more plausible and/or more sympathetic through the use of well-known folk-psychiatric explanations, e.g. a bad childhood, extreme emotional distress or trauma, or even brain-washing. In its most basic form, however, madness functions as an all-purpose motivation and a form of circular reasoning: The villain’s actions do not need to make sense, since madness has left the villainous character devoid of all reason and inhibitions. Tied to this is the third and final purpose which madness is made to serve: It helps to establish the villain as a character who must be stopped at all costs. Because the villain lacks or comes to lack reason and inhibitions, he or she is capable of steadily raising the stakes and escalating the conflict by committing ever crueler and more malicious acts, which in turn earns the player’s growing antipathy. In a novel or film, the reader or viewer is a witness/spectator to the unfolding narrative who wants to read about or see the antagonist subdued, brought to justice or otherwise overcome by the protagonist, yet in a game, the conflict hinges upon the player’s desire to take action. For these reasons, videogame villains are especially prone to madness, which acts as a catalyst, an explanation and an implicit motivating factor for the player at the same time. This is not to say, of course, that all videogames follow the same patterns, adhere to the same narrative and game-architectural structures, or present the madness of their villains in a uniform manner. The genre and type of game, its target audience, as well as the tone of its narrative greatly affect the level of seriousness and nuance afforded to the portrayal of these antagonistic characters, their motivations, and the role (if any) their madness plays in the story. For this reason, the following examples are not intended to be comprehensive; rather, they are meant to show the variety of purposes which a villain’s madness might fulfill in a game story.

648 Incidentally, this visual “otherness” can also be observed in the mad villains which appear in certain types of movies (e.g. horror, action), who are often portrayed by visually striking actors (e.g. Boris Karloff, Jack Nicholson) and/or enhanced by particular make-up and costume design.
7.2.1. Camp and Creepy: Villains and the Entertainment Value of Madness

Generally speaking, videogame antagonists are rarely subtle characters. This does not necessarily imply a lack of depth or nuance in terms of characterization, but it means that their aesthetic appearance, actions and words, as well as their “power” in terms of gameplay (i.e. how difficult they are to confront and defeat), are intended to draw and dominate the player’s attention. In fact, the antagonist’s actions sooner or later become the driving force behind the player/player character’s quest and frequently influence the obstacles which must be overcome in order to complete the game successfully. Even if an antagonist cannot be directly confronted until the climax of the game, they nevertheless demonstrate their reach and influence by following, anticipating and interfering with the player’s progress. Their presence must be felt even if they themselves are not present in a given moment in the game. By virtue of their dominant role and function in the story (context) and gameplay (challenge), the villain tends to become one of the primary sources of the player’s entertainment, whether in terms of humor, fear, repulsion, etc. This is particularly apparent in minimalist games which feature a silent and/or “invisible” (i.e. first-person camera perspective) protagonist, thus placing the antagonist – their personality and actions – front and center. As the player advances, the stakes rise and the conflict escalates, so too do the villain’s actions and threats escalate in order to keep pace with the mounting difficulty of the game.

Since these requirements – entertainment and escalation – result in ever more outrageous schemes and/or erratic, sometimes even inconsistent behavior, the nebulous trait of “madness” often functions as a simultaneous explanation and justification, since the pop-cultural understanding of madness entails irrationality, unpredictability, incomprehensibility, and, of course, danger (see above). Madness frees the villain from the conventions of logic and morality, sets them apart and makes them even more “other” than their status as an antagonistic force, and conveniently accomplishes what it has accomplished for centuries: It amuses, frightens and repulses – it entertains.

One example of this fairly archetypal portrayal of a mad villain occurs in Final Fantasy VI (1994), a steampunk-fantasy RPG whose fictional world is embroiled in war. A plucky group of rebels called the Returners (among them the fourteen playable characters) is engaged in a desperate struggle against “The Empire,” a militaristic nation with the aim of conquering all other countries in order to secure their

---


650 See 7.4. for details.
Espers, creatures of great magical power, and use them towards an unknown end. They are opposed in their endeavor by Kefka, the emperor’s court mage and former test subject in a military experiment to create skilled magic users. The experimentation, though never described or shown in detail, has taken a heavy toll on Kefka’s mental state, giving rise to a strong desire for power and prominent sadistic streak. Despite his dramatic history, Kefka is introduced as a comedic and frequently ineffectual obstacle in the protagonists’ path who wears his madness on his sleeve in the truest sense of the term. He dresses in garish, mismatched clothing similar to a clown’s attire, uses childish or nonsensical expressions to communicate his displeasure, is prone to delusions of grandeur and maniacal laughter, narcissistic tirades and temper tantrums, and takes pleasure in bullying his subordinates (whom he commands despite his questionable sanity). This is illustrated by the following scene, which takes place near the beginning of Final Fantasy VI after the protagonists have sought refuge with Edgar, the ruler of a small desert kingdom, and Kefka has been sent to pursue them:

**Kefka:** Phooey! Emperor Gestahl’s stupid orders!  
**Kefka:** (jumping up and down) Edgar, you pinhead! Why do you have to live in the middle of nowhere? These recon jobs are the pits!  
**Kefka:** Ahem... there’s SAND on my boots!  
**Soldiers:** (sweating nervously and rushing to rectify the situation) Yes, Sir! All set, Sir!  
**Kefka:** (cackling) Idiots!

This scene is the first in the game which grants the player insight into the mercurial aspects of Kefka’s character and the comedic situations which arise due to his wildly unpredictable temper. In the span of only four lines, Kefka’s mood and focus shift dramatically from voicing childish complaints about his assignment, to preoccupation with minor details of his appearance, to intimidating and belittling the members of his entourage. His mind is not on the task at hand (capturing the fugitives), giving the player an impression of a comically inept antagonist who is difficult to take seriously. However, only a short while later the player is forced to reconsider this impression as Kefka, irritated at the king’s refusal to cooperate, decides to simply set fire to the entire castle town in order to flush out his elusive prey. Although the fire is quickly extinguished and the protagonists manage to escape, this dramatic change from a self-absorbed bully to a gleeful arsonist who is willing, even happy to endanger untold numbers of

---

651 Final Fantasy VI. The game does not feature any voice-acting due to the limited capabilities of the 8-bit sound chip of the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) for which it was originally developed in 1994. However, the developers still included a “pseudo-vocal” sound to signify Kefka’s maniacal laughter.
innocent civilians in the blink of an eye is a startling reminder that Kefka is not only quite mad, but quite
dangerous in his madness, as well.

This juxtaposition of Kefka’s comical irrationality and his endless thirst for inflicting suffering on
others occurs repeatedly. For example, many of the early combat encounters between Kefka and the
motley crew of rebels controlled by the player are framed as comedic interludes meant to show Kefka’s
ineptitude, cowardliness and overestimation of his own abilities, as they frequently end with an injured
Kefka fleeing from the battle and/or struggling to save face in front of his subordinates afterwards. In
fact, Kefka’s reaction to being bested in battle becomes a running gag in the game that occurs several
times in a row (depending on how often the player engages Kefka):

\[
\text{Kefka: (jumping around in agitation) Yeouch!!!} \\
\text{[Party Member]: Kefka! Wait!!!} \\
\text{Kefka: (laughing maniacally and running) “Wait,” he says… do I look like a waiter?}\]
\]

However, these comedic encounters are almost immediately overshadowed by demonstrations of Kefka’s
sadism and cruelty, his enjoyment of chaos and complete lack of moral/ethical boundaries. How serious a
threat Kefka is to the player’s party and, indeed, to all inhabitants of the virtual world, is finally driven
home by an utterly senseless act of violence. During the Empire’s siege of yet another kingdom, Kefka
poisons the river which acts as the water supply of the entire castle town, against explicit orders from his
sovereign and the desperate protestations of his own subordinates. The deed is not the result of coldly
calculated, strategic considerations on Kefka’s part, but simply due to his own boredom and need for
amusement, which he makes clear as the town’s inhabitants lie dying slowly in the streets: “Hee, hee!
Nothing can beat the music of hundreds of voices screaming in unison!”

Throughout the game, Kefka’s madness grows in direct proportion to his power. Despite his
erratic moods, eccentric conduct and open cruelty, he is also able to deceive his sovereign into thinking
him a loyal servant, a fact which Kefka uses in order to secure powerful magical artifacts for himself. As
he absorbs more and more magic in order to strengthen himself, he becomes progressively nihilistic and
megalomaniacal, which culminates in his attempt to become a literal god and lay waste to the world out of
sheer lust for carnage and suffering: “I will destroy everything... I will create a monument to non-

---

\[^{652}\text{Final Fantasy VI.}\]
\[^{653}\text{Final Fantasy VI.}\]
In addition, his physical form changes to reflect his disconnection from the world and all its inhabitants, turning from a regular-sized human into a gigantic, multi-winged demon. In other words, Kefka’s all-encompassing madness leaves him dehumanized and beyond redemption. The more his madness consumes him, the stronger and more dangerous he becomes – an unfettered, inhuman and chaotic embodiment of evil whose eradication at the hands of the player is not only justified, but necessary.

Despite the fact that Final Fantasy VI, published in 1994, is positively ancient in terms of game history, the type of madness it portrays is still fairly common even in modern videogames. Some, such as Uncharted 2: Among Thieves (2009) or Far Cry 3 (2012), forgo comedic elements almost entirely in order to emphasize their villains’ evil and destructive nature, which is elevated past all reason and logic by their madness. For example, the first-person action-adventure game Far Cry 3 features not one, but several mad antagonists, the most prominent of whom is Vaas Montenegro, a drug smuggler, pirate and human trafficker who regards the islands as his own personal kingdom. The player adopts the role of Jason Brody, a young American tourist stranded on the islands due to a skydiving mishap, who must learn to survive in the hostile environment while trying to save his equally unlucky friends. Vaas is the protagonist’s/player’s introduction to the nightmarish realities of the tropical paradise. He is the first person Jason sees upon awakening inside a bamboo cage in the slavers’ camp and comes to understand the terrible turn which his fortunes have taken. Vaas’s status as a ruthless criminal who is known for murdering, kidnapping and selling people into (sexual) slavery is almost immediately overshadowed by the far greater threat which Vaas poses because of his madness. In fact, although he claims to be mainly interested in the material aspect of his activities (“Well, I hope your mama and papa really, really love you, existence!”), parallel to his escalating actions and the resultant change from a comedic nuisance into a truly threatening antagonist in terms of the plot, Kefka becomes a steadily more challenging opponent during gameplay confrontations. This is reflected not only in the battles which the player (in the role of the Returners) must fight against him, but also in the obstacles the player must traverse in order to confront Kefka in the first place. Whereas Kefka initially interferes with the player’s party of characters directly, the final confrontation only takes place after the player has managed to climb Kefka’s “monument to nonexistence,” a gigantic tower built from the corpses of the slain Espers.


654 Final Fantasy VI.

655 Parallel to his escalating actions and the resultant change from a comedic nuisance into a truly threatening antagonist in terms of the plot, Kefka becomes a steadily more challenging opponent during gameplay confrontations. This is reflected not only in the battles which the player (in the role of the Returners) must fight against him, but also in the obstacles the player must traverse in order to confront Kefka in the first place. Whereas Kefka initially interferes with the player’s party of characters directly, the final confrontation only takes place after the player has managed to climb Kefka’s “monument to nonexistence,” a gigantic tower built from the corpses of the slain Espers.


657 “I rule this fucking kingdom.” Far Cry 3, dev. Ubisoft Montréal et al. (PlayStation 3: Ubisoft, 2012).
cause you two white boys look expensive! And that’s good because I like expensive things...\(^{658}\), it becomes almost immediately clear that his criminal activities double as a convenient outlet for his deeply warped personality.

The madness of \textit{Far Cry 3}'s villain manifests in his propensity for lengthy, at times barely coherent pseudo-philosophical speeches, his tendency to lapse into uncontrollable rages at the slightest provocation, and his pleasure in all manner of sadistic games, such as setting the protagonist free in order to hunt him for sport. In fact, he often spares the protagonist’s life purely to have partly mocking, partly sincere, wholly unprompted and entirely one-sided “conversations” with him:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{Vaas:} (sitting cross-legged in front of Jason, who is bound and gagged) Did I ever tell you what the definition of insanity is? Insanity is doing the exact... same fucking thing... over and over again expecting... shit to change... That. Is. Crazy. The first time somebody told me that, I dunno, I thought they were bullshitting me, so, I shot him. The thing is... He was right. And then I started seeing, everywhere I looked, everywhere I looked all these fucking pricks, everywhere I looked, doing the exact same fucking thing... over and over and over and over again thinking “this time is gonna be different” no, no, no please... This time is gonna be different, I'm sorry, I don’t like... The way...
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textit{(Vaas punches a supply crate, growing visibly agitated at Jason despite the latter's inability to speak)}
\textbf{Vaas:} ...you are looking at me... Okay, do you have a fucking problem in your head, do you think I am bullshitting you, do you think I am lying? Fuck you! Okay? Fuck you!... It’s okay, man. I’m gonna chill, hermano. I’m gonna chill... The thing is... Alright, the thing is, I killed you once already... and it’s not like I am fucking crazy. It’s okay... It’s like water under the bridge. Did I ever tell you the definition... of insanity?\(^{659}\)
\end{quote}

Vaas’s madness in \textit{Far Cry 3} fulfills a similar purpose as Kefka’s madness does in \textit{Final Fantasy VI}. Both are based on age-old, common and fairly stereotypical depictions of madness as discussed by Wahl\(^{660}\) and establish a rather unambiguous link between madness and evil. Their madness makes them amoral, unpredictable and violent, but entertaining – whether humorously or frighteningly so. Yet, the overall relevancy of their madness to and its integration into their respective games differ on a fundamental level. Kefka’s madness is tied firmly to the plot of \textit{Final Fantasy VI}; it is a byproduct of the Empire’s militarism and expansionist politics, which set the events of the game in motion. However, the Empire’s

\(^{658}\) \textit{Far Cry 3.}
\(^{659}\) \textit{Far Cry 3.}
\(^{660}\) Cf. Wahl, \textit{Media Madness.}
machinations steadily fade into the background as Kefka accumulates more and more power and commits ever more heinous crimes. Kefka’s madness becomes the driving force of the action and the player’s motivations: Stopping the military threat of the Empire becomes a secondary, and eventually a non-existent goal as Kefka’s lust for destruction begins to lay waste to locations which the player has visited before and to affect NPCs whom the player (in the role of the Returners) has come to know and befriend. Kefka’s madness becomes the primary threat to parts of and experiences in the game to which the player has formed an emotional connection. In contrast, Vaas’s madness in *Far Cry 3* is never traced to its point of origin and has comparatively little bearing on the progression of the game. Since Vaas is already established as a materialistic, unscrupulous criminal whose very profession renders him a dangerous opponent and endows him with sufficient motivation to pursue and threaten Jason (especially once Jason begins to interfere with Vaas’s business operations in an effort to rescue his friends), his madness mainly serves to provoke visceral emotions and reactions in the player: fear, horror, helplessness, revulsion. This is enhanced by the very design of the game: Whereas confrontations with Kefka in *Final Fantasy VI* take the form of stand-offs in which the player must delegate his party of characters to react appropriately to Kefka’s ever more powerful assault (e.g. by healing, counter-attacking, guarding, etc.), *Far Cry 3* emphasizes the protagonist’s vulnerability and his lack of distance from any kind of threat through the use of the first-person perspective, whose limited field of vision creates a sense of spatial immediacy. This sense of vulnerability is heightened in confrontations with Vaas; not only do these confrontations usually place Jason/the player in a severely disadvantaged position (e.g. captivity, no means of self-defense, injury), but Vaas’s ever shifting moods do not allow either Jason or the player to anticipate or steel themselves against whichever whim Vaas indulges in next.

In short, the examples *Final Fantasy VI* and *Far Cry 3* show that even when two games appear to follow the same general template for the depiction of madness in their antagonistic characters (i.e. the equation of madness with evil, amorality, unpredictability and violence), factors beyond the plot, such as camera perspective, can substantially influence which kinds of emotions the portrayal inspires in the player or how the player is motivated to continue the game in pursuit of the villain.
7.2.2. Sympathy for the Devil: The Justification of Villainous Madness

Other games, especially those which aim at telling dramatic stories with a strong inclination towards realism and seriousness, may take painstaking measures to humanize the mad villain, i.e. to slowly dismantle the impression of the villain as a monster or a chaotic force of nature by delving into their past and highlighting the specific circumstances which govern or have driven them to madness. This is often accomplished by resorting to folk psychiatric explanations (see 5.1.3.) which are as familiar to the game developers as they are to the players due to their prominence in popular culture as a whole: a bad childhood, traumatic experiences, loss, rejection or even debilitating physical injury or illness can serve as implicit or explicit explanations for a character’s madness, and, by extension, for their crimes. One example is Heavy Rain (2010), a dramatic mystery game which is particularly interesting due to its deliberate resemblance to film noir and police procedurals.661 Set in an unnamed American city modeled after Philadelphia,662 the game revolves around a fictional serial killer who strikes fear into the hearts of parents. Nicknamed the Origami Killer due to his strange habit of leaving small origami figurines with his victims, the criminal abducts a young boy during the rainy season, imprisons him in a hidden location open to the downpour, and leaves him to drown. At the same time, the killer invites the boy’s father to participate in a series of extreme and increasingly sadistic trials. By delivering a box containing several cryptic hints and a cell phone which, once activated, displays the message, “How far will you go to save someone you love?”663 the father is challenged to demonstrate his devotion to his child by driving against highway traffic for five miles within five minutes, crawling through a narrow tunnel filled with broken glass, braving a maze of active electrical condensers, cutting off one of his own fingers, committing a murder, and drinking poison. Only if the father prevails in each trial will the killer provide him with the clues to find and rescue his son, a feat which none of the victims’ parents have managed thus far.

The game is experienced from the point of view of four different characters: Ethan Mars, whose son is the latest child to be kidnapped, Madison Paige, a reporter on the trail of the killer, Norman Jayden, an FBI profiler working the case, and Scott Shelby, a former police officer turned private investigator who


663 Heavy Rain, dev. Quantic Dream (PlayStation 3: Sony Computer Entertainment, 2010).
has been hired by other grieving parents to investigate the crimes independently. The player controls each character in turn during a specific portion of the game (called a “chapter”), each of which presents its own unique challenges and yields pieces of the greater puzzle, although the underlying play mechanics remain the same. In the role of the selected character, the player must search for information, solve riddles and interact with various other characters who are in some way involved in the hunt for the Origami Killer, as well as respond to the challenges which arise from specific situations, e.g. breaking into a house, hiding from pursuers, or, in Ethan Mars’s case, forcing himself to perform the cruel tasks which the Origami Killer has set for him. Depending on the character’s location and scenario, the player is presented with several options – input prompts disguised as “thought snippets” circling the character’s body – which allow them to pick particular responses in conversations with NPCs or perform particular actions.

Out of the four playable characters, Shelby’s chapters offer by far the greatest amount of insight into the killer’s mind – due to the fact that the killer is none other than Shelby himself. The player is initially unaware of this, but as they progress through the game, it is slowly revealed that Shelby’s job and involvement are primarily a means of covering his own tracks. By keeping an eye on the police investigation and visiting the parents whose children he murdered, Shelby is able to dispose of any evidence pointing to him and to plant false leads in order to hinder the authorities in their search. Towards the end of the game, Shelby’s motivations and the reason for his underlying madness are revealed in the form of a playable flashback. His modus operandi is derived from a traumatic event in his childhood, when his brother became stuck inside a drainage pipe at an abandoned construction site during a torrential downpour. Their alcoholic father did not believe the young Shelby’s pleas for help, leaving the boy to watch his brother drown. This incident eventually led Shelby to concoct a large-scale, horrific experiment. The children he kidnaps, imprisons and eventually leaves to die are truly nothing more than by-products of Shelby’s desire to find a “perfect father” who is willing to do everything – including mutilating and poisoning himself – to save his son, as he eventually explains to Ethan: “I’ve been looking for a long… long time, Ethan. Looking for a father that would be able to do what mine could not do: sacrifice himself in order to save his son.”

Like a number of American television series and movies such as Criminal Minds, CSI or Law and Order: SVU, Heavy Rain appears to be of two minds with regard to its mad antagonist. On the one hand,
the game seeks to give method to Shelby’s madness and to humanize him, which is especially apparent in the flashback to Shelby’s childhood, in which the player assumes the role of Shelby’s ten-year-old self:

During a rainstorm, Scott and his twin brother John are chased out of the house by their drunken father and decide to explore a nearby construction site to pass the time. As the more timid Scott, the player follows John around the site, climbing machinery, playing with building materials, and performing various reckless physical feats. During the sequence, the controls are particularly heavy and sluggish in order to simulate a child’s unsteady walk and play behavior, and each of Shelby’s actions is accompanied by hesitation and considerable effort as he follows his brother across wet slabs of concrete, metal beams, stacks of bricks, and even down a steep construction chute. All the while, various button commands allow the player to hear Scott’s inner thoughts as he worries about the worsening weather, his brother’s increasingly foolhardy antics, and being beaten by his father. The adventure culminates in a game of hide-and-seek which even allows the player to “cheat” at seeking by skipping ahead in the countdown sequence as many children are wont to do in order to cement the impression of Shelby as an ordinary child. However, the fun ends abruptly when John begins calling for help, having become trapped inside an overflowing drainage pipe. Scott/the player makes multiple attempts to pull him to safety, receives more abuse when he runs to his drunk father for help, and is finally left with no recourse but to return and hold his brother’s hand as he drowns. The entirety of the flashback gives the player a condensed experience of the life of an abused, insecure, and traumatized child, inviting them to empathize with Shelby.

In addition, the adult Shelby is capable of very ambiguous behavior during key moments in the game. As he visits the bereaved parents of his victims to collect any evidence which might be traced back to him, and is confronted with their misery, Shelby is often placed in a position where he is capable of acting in ways seemingly inconsistent with a murderous madman who is only interested in ensuring that he cannot be linked to the crimes. For instance, when Hassan, the owner of a small shop and father of his seventh victim, is threatened by a robber at gunpoint, Shelby may interfere and save Hassan’s life, and/or even convince the robber to give up his life of crime. The actions taken and the outcome of the scenario depend on the player’s decisions and skill at executing their chosen plan of action. Should the player/Shelby choose to do nothing, however, Hassan is killed by the robber, thus ridding Shelby of a witness. Similarly, when Shelby visits Susan Bowles, the mother of his eighth victim, he discovers that

---

665 *Heavy Rain*. 
Susan has slit her wrists in an unsuccessful suicide attempt, leaving her infant daughter behind. Instead of simply abandoning Susan to die, however, Shelby administers first aid, calms her down and even attends to the baby’s needs in the mother’s stead – changing its diapers, feeding it, and rocking it to sleep. In fact, he even reluctantly allows the mother of another victim, Lauren Winter, to join him on the supposed “hunt” for the Origami Killer, and may save her from drowning in a sinking car during the course of the “investigation” (should the player fail or remain passive, Lauren drowns). It is left unclear whether these acts are merely a false kindness, born from the desire to prolong his victims’ suffering indefinitely, or whether Shelby is motivated by a subconscious desire to atone – or at least, not to inflict more harm than is “necessary” in his worldview – even as he continues to subject ever new families to the pain and grief of losing a child for the sake of his experiment.

On the other hand, despite the considerable effort to highlight Shelby’s humanity, the character is also portrayed as a remorseless, irredeemable menace whose twisted desires can never be satisfied and who must be removed from society by any means necessary. This is, of course, demonstrated not only by the severity and number of his crimes – in addition to his eight young victims and the fathers who presumably died during the extremely sadistic trials (several are said to have “disappeared” following the abduction of their sons) – but also by Shelby’s modus operandi, which involves sending the parents of his intended victims cryptic, unsettling letters to stoke their anxiety,666 the slow and torturous scavenger hunt said parents are sent on (each trial must be completed in order to receive a fragmentary clue as to the child’s whereabouts), and, of course, the sadistic and outright deadly nature of the trials themselves.

Moreover, Shelby’s story does not end in a court of justice, a prison, or even in a psychiatric facility for the criminally insane. It should be noted that Heavy Rain allows the player to achieve a variety of different conclusions to its story via decision-making and skill when completing the various challenges. These outcomes can differ substantially from one another; for example, major characters might die if the player cannot (or will not) act to save them from peril, or they might otherwise exit the stage (e.g. by being

---

666 The letter which Shelby sends to the parents appears to be a reference to the fairytale The Pied Piper of Hamlin, in which the Piper takes revenge on the village for withholding his just reward by spiriting away every last child with his bewitching music:

When the parents came home from Church
All their children were gone.
They searched and called for them,
They cried and begged,
But it was all to no avail.
The children have never been seen again (Heavy Rain).
imprisoned as a scapegoat for the killer’s crimes), they might manage to rescue Ethan’s son but not
apprehend the true criminal, etc. Given the multitude of possible outcomes, Shelby’s fate remains
remarkably consistent from one ending to the next by following the pattern set for the mad criminal in the
mystery films and police procedurals which are its sources of inspirations. In almost every ending scenario
the player can achieve, Shelby dies a violent death at the hands of one of the people he has wronged, who
either kill him in self-defense or revenge. For instance, in the scenario where Ethan Mars manages to
rescue his son on his own, Shelby reveals himself and allows the enraged father to shoot him, stating, “Go
ahead. You can kill me now. It doesn’t matter anymore. You’ve accomplished what I wanted to see.” In
another scenario where FBI profiler Jayden manages to solve the case and rescue the child in the father’s
stead, Shelby becomes enraged and attempts to kill Jayden for interfering in his experiment. During the
climactic struggle atop an old industrial complex, Jayden manages to shove Shelby off a precipice and into
a running trash compactor, leaving him to be crushed. The sole scenario in which Shelby survives hinges
on the player aiming at committing the perfect crime, namely by enabling Shelby to destroy all evidence,
to let the potential witnesses (such as the shopkeeper during the robbery) die, and to successfully frame
Ethan Mars for his crimes, which leads him to commit suicide in prison. The ending to the “perfect
crime” scenario shows Shelby walking down a busy street in the pouring rain, unrecognized and
unbothered by any passers-by, to presumably continue his murder spree until his twisted desires are
satisfied. At the end of the day, **Heavy Rain** conforms to the pattern laid out by countless works of popular
culture and their mad antagonists. Despite the attempt to portray Shelby as a disturbed human being
capable of committing horrifying deeds as well as acts of kindness or heroism, and despite the exceedingly
rare decision to allow the player to experience parts of the game from the antagonist’s perspective, the
character meets the same fate which all too commonly befalls mad antagonists in– and outside of
videogames, regardless of whether they are portrayed as nigh-on mythical monsters or victims of their
own disordered minds. In each case, the threat they pose to other characters in their fictional universe is
too great, and the arm of the law is too weak or slow-moving to mete out justice. When this perspective
on madness is combined with the traditional videogame objective of “beating the final boss,” i.e.
erasing/destroying the threat embodied by the antagonistic character, it is clear why, even in a game with
at least a dozen ending scenarios, the mad villain’s fate all too often remains (un)surprisingly predictable.

---

667 **Heavy Rain.**
7.3. Undoing the Hero: Madness as a Tool of Deconstruction

Madness due to failure or dissonance between a character’s internal and external world is often relegated to a curious position in videogames. Although it is rarely a central theme, it can be found in games with branching story paths and/or multiple endings, which allow the player to explore a number of possible scenarios based on certain decisions. Games with multiple endings frequently make use of a loose categorization system which is based on either how thorough and/or successful the player was in completing various objectives, or on how positive/negative the narrative tone of the endings is. This emotional sliding scale divides the various outcomes into one or several bad endings, one or several normal/neutral endings, at least one good ending and finally, one “golden” or “true” ending, which usually requires the most player effort to achieve and is considered to be the definitive ending. Among this multitude of possible outcomes, the bad endings (again, not to be confused with a game over) often focus on the protagonist’s failure or the dereliction of their duty/goals, which is often accompanied by a change in their personality which is so drastic that it is bordering (or trespassing into) madness. In certain games, however, the exploration of madness is a central theme with far-reaching consequences for the story and its characters.

7.3.1. Drakengard and the Constraints of the Fairytale

One such example can be found in the 2004 dark fantasy game Drakengard (known as Drag-on Dragoon in Japan), which dramatizes the madness resulting from the conflict between the characters’ internal and external reality. The game is set in a heavily fictionalized version of medieval Europe populated by dragons, spirits and sorcerers, and governed by the rules of ancient magic. Drakengard’s world is kept in balance by four powerful magical seals, three of them enshrined in hidden temples, the fourth and most powerful seared onto the body of a single human woman who is then revered as a “Goddess.” This sacrificial maiden must endure the never-ending pain of the seal in order to ensure the continued existence of all creation – an agony so great it is said to feel like “the flesh [is] being rent from her bones.” As an object of religious worship and a supposed key to maintaining the world order, the Goddess is at the center of all political power struggles, inadvertently inciting the world’s major nations (only referred to as “the Empire” and “the Union”) to war with one another. The player is placed in the role of Caim, the

---

crown prince of a small kingdom whose younger sister Furiae is the latest sacrifice chosen to serve the
world in the role of the Goddess. In order to protect his sister, as well as to take revenge against the
Empire, whose conquerors laid waste to his kingdom and brutally slaughtered his parents by feeding them
to a dragon, Caim lives only for battle, fighting in the war as a common soldier. From this derives the
majority of Drakengard’s gameplay: The player must fight their way through a slew battlefields by using an
arsenal of hand-to-hand weapons and magic spells, thereby fulfilling combat-related challenges such as
slaying a certain number of enemies, defending key locations, or reaching particular destinations within a
time limit. Once Caim enters a pact with a dragon, so-called “aerial missions” become available, in which
the player assumes control of the dragon in flight in order to dispatch airborne foes.

Drakengard’s premise seems to suggest that the game relies heavily on the tropes and clichés of
high fantasy fiction, which are themselves based on the medieval chivalric romances, fairy tales and
Arthurian legends – e.g. rescuing the damsel in distress, doing one’s knightly duty in the name of love and
honor, and performing heroic deeds to prove oneself. However, the game quickly disabuses the player of
such notions by engaging in the merciless deconstruction of said genre conventions. This does not happen
gradually; rather, the veil of idealism and glory is ripped off as soon as the player is thrust into their first
battle, exposing the world of Drakengard as a realm of chaos and madness. The battlefields on which the
player fights are variations of bleak and ruined wastelands, trampled by the feet of ten thousands of
soldiers, skies tinged red and black with smoke and cannon fire, as well as the smoldering ruins of cities
and smaller settlements, filled with nothing but corpses. The only intact locations in the game are enemy
strongholds, which usually take the shape of massive medieval fortresses and gigantic armored airships.
The battlefields are packed with hundreds, sometimes thousands of enemies, each one encased in a
faceless suit of armor, thus giving the impression that their numbers never truly dwindle, no matter how
hard Caim/the player fights. Worse still, the enemy onslaught is relentless, since there is no way to
withdraw from the heat of battle in order to regroup and get one’s bearings, and the only means of
recovering Caim’s health are to fight well enough in order for enemies to leave behind rare magical orbs
upon defeat which heal a small amount of hit points or briefly strengthen the character. The dizzying
incoherence of the battlefield functions as a form of defamiliarization, a clear indicator to the player that
the world they have just entered has no room for courtly romances, honorable duels and white knights. Its
chaos is all-consuming, and the only way to keep it at bay is to fight with the single-minded determination
that borders on mindlessness.

This frenzied, bleak and chaotic setting is complemented by the musical score. *Drakengard’s* soundtrack is neither rousing nor inspiring, as one would expect in a tale of knightly heroism; instead, the arrangements can be variously described as discordant, oppressive, repetitive and almost cacophonous, as they have been designed to alternately unsettle, hypnotize and grate. According to composer Nobuyoshi Sano, the soundtrack remixes passages from existing classical pieces such as Dvorak’s *Othello Op. 93*, Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Capriccio Espagnol* and even Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro* by subjecting them to all manner of audio editing techniques such as sampling, shuffling, looping, layering, and reverse-playback in order to “bring to life through music the almost trance-like atmosphere of slicing and attacking the swarming enemies during gameplay and the story more strongly colored by madness and despair as it progresses.”

The impression that emerges as the player fights ever onward through the game is not one of triumph and reward, but that of a Sisyphean task, a madman’s endeavor.

Indeed, madness has *Drakengard* firmly in its grasp. Almost every one of its characters – be they allies the player gains, or enemies that arise to oppose them – is afflicted with it in one way or another. The hostile Empire with its overwhelming military might, for instance, is firmly in the thrall of a secret cult which drives the war effort by brainwashing and beguiling the masses for its own ends. The cult members, in turn, are fanatical adherents to a variation of the Goddess legend, which states that the erasure of all four seals will trigger not the end of the world, but its “complete reconstruction.” They are led by an immensely powerful priestess who is revealed to be a mere child: Manah, a girl gifted in magic, whose mind has been broken by the years of abuse she suffered at her mother’s hands, and who has thus become easy prey for mysterious entities known only as “The Watchers,” supernatural beings who seem to desire nothing but pandemonium.

The situation among the protagonist’s pitifully small circle of companions is no different. Most are allies by chance and circumstance rather than trust or loyalty, and each ally is battling (or has succumbed to) their own inner demons, which makes them at best unreliable, at worst dangerous. Some have simply given up, choosing to consign themselves to inaction and wallowing in delusions. Others have endured such cruelties at the hands of the Empire as to have lost all reason. An example of the former is...

---


the hierarch Verdelet, once a powerful mystic and leader of the religious order in charge of the Goddess, who has been driven to despair by the horrors of war. Instead of offering the leadership and guidance expected of his position, Verdelet proves nearly incapable of protecting even his own life, since his reaction to every new threat is to lapse into a series of desperate, wailing prayers ("Ye gods, hear our cries, and show mercy to your poor children!"). An example of the latter is Arioch, a civilian who was driven insane by witnessing the torture and murder of her family at the hands of Empire soldiers. The trauma has not only kindled in her an insatiable thirst for violence and bloodshed, but has given birth to a terrible coping mechanism: Arioch now sees any child she meets as one of her own murdered children, and seeks to be reunited with them in the worst way possible, namely by devouring them in order to return them "to the protection of the womb." Despite her violent outbursts and unpredictable behavior, she is still allowed to remain with Caim’s group, showing how slim the pickings have become: Drakengard’s war-torn world has long since consumed all its heroes, leaving only those who are too foolish or mad to stop struggling onward.

However, in this sea of chaos and insanity, it is the madness which eats away at Drakengard’s three protagonists – Caim, his sister Furiae, and Inuart, her former betrothed and Caim’s close friend – which proves to be the most interesting due to its interconnectedness and metatextuality. Contrary to characters like Arioch or Manah, who practically revel in their madness, the three protagonists hide their crumbling sanity relatively well, maintaining the illusion of Drakengard as a typical fantasy game for a while despite the fact that the visual design, soundtrack and gameplay mechanics suggest otherwise from the start. This is primarily because the protagonists initially seem to fit the very familiar roles of a (female) damsel in distress and her (male) protectors. These roles of masculine activity and feminine passivity are familiar notes in an old, old song, deeply familiar from centuries of literature, poetry, art and other storytelling media. Yet, as the player progresses, cracks begin to appear in the stereotypical molds in which the protagonists have been cast.

The chinks in Caim’s heroic armor are the most readily apparent since they emerge during the initial stages of play. In fact, Caim begins the game as a dying man – mortally wounded in combat, he nevertheless struggles towards the besieged castle where his sister has sought refuge, cutting down the enemies in his way without any heed for his grievous wounds. His desperation to live and continue

671 Drakengard.
672 Drakengard.
fighting makes Caim willing to sacrifice anything and everything he has, even signing away the independence of his own mind, heart and soul in a bid for power. Although he cannot do so much as look at a dragon without experiencing crippling flashbacks of his parents’ gruesome murder, he still chooses to bind himself to a female dragon in a magical pact without a moment’s hesitation, thereby consigning himself to a life alongside a creature he fears and despises. These actions, although extreme, could still be seen as motivated by noble sentiment, i.e. the desire to continue protecting his sister and repel the invaders in order to reclaim his kingdom. However, these heroic aspects of Caim’s deeds are undermined by his deep-seated hatred for the Empire, which does not seem to abate no matter how much blood he manages to spill in battle. Throughout, multiple characters remark on his steadily worsening obsession with revenge, his increasing brutality in combat, and the fact that he seems to be looking forward to – even enjoying – the danger and cruelty of armed conflict. Particularly the dragon, who is now privy to Caim’s innermost thoughts and feelings by virtue of their pact, frequently questions, criticizes or sarcastically comments on his actions despite the fact that she holds no love for humans (“Does only slaughter calm your soul, Caim?”; “Do you acknowledge only those you wish to kill?”; “Now to hunt the rest of the jackals. Your favourite sport, Caim…” (Drakengard). In fact, as the game progresses, it becomes clear that Caim has shed all moral scruples and inhibitions, since he kills even the Empire’s child soldiers without remorse, his companions’ pleas falling on deaf ears. (Notably, the player-as-Caim cannot proceed through these missions in such a way as to avoid harming the children, since the victory conditions tend to prohibit acts of mercy and compassion – precisely the emotions which Caim has abandoned.)

However, Caim’s bloodthirsty obsession is much more than an expression of the losses and hardships he has endured in this war-torn virtual world; it has taken on the shape of an excuse, a means of distancing himself from his loved ones and pretending that he does not notice the tragedy unfolding away from the frontlines.

At first glance, Caim’s sister Furiae appears as a perfect representation of a sacrificial maiden as she is found in countless myths and fairy tales. Pale, slight, doe-eyed, physically dwarfed by the male characters, and clad in an austere white dress, she visually embodies the archetypal damsel as described by

---

673 *Drakengard.*

674 Leonard: “The garrison soldiers are all conscripts. Caim, do not slaughter them so mercilessly! They are so powerless, yet your sword spares none. Your heart is black” (*Drakengard*).

675 Dragon: “The three of you... Have you grown so accustomed to denying the truth?” (*Drakengard*).
Niklas Luhmann: “[...] fine-boned, delicate, weak, perpetually close to fainting [...], without any sexual awareness of her own.”676 Indeed, spiritual and physical purity are central to the role of the Goddess, which demands for the sacrificial maiden to sever all her worldly ties, essentially giving up her status and rights as a human being, and to sequester herself in a shrine for the rest of her natural life in order to avoid contamination,677 unable to speak to or come in contact with anyone save the hierarch. This forcible shattering of any and all bonds has taken a terrible toll on Furiae, who was named the Goddess at only fourteen years of age. Although the outbreak of war has prevented her complete isolation from the world, Furiae has nevertheless lost her home and parents to the Empire, been forced to renounce her familial ties to her brother Caim, and to break her engagement to her childhood friend Inuart. After enduring five years of such pain and suffering, Furiae has seemingly accepted her status as an untouchable Goddess: silently bearing the burden of the seal, serving as an object of worship for her people, and being unable to do anything except pray for those fighting for her sake. Her mind, however, is in turmoil, as she has been unable to suppress her human feelings and desires – particularly her awakening sexuality. Contrary to the convention of the distressed damsel, Furiae possesses a sexuality and sexual awareness, yet she is not only expected to rid herself of them in order to preserve her purity, but also denied a heroic male figure upon whom to project her need and longing. Inuart, her former betrothed, is a gentle but weak man who desperately denies his love for her and instead seeks to sublimate it into worship of and servitude to the Goddess. As such, he is unable to protect Furiae from physical harm, unable to be her pillar of emotional strength, and unable to fulfill her secret wish to be saved from her fate. Her own brother Caim is the one who fulfills the criteria of the heroic, masculine savior Furiae longs for (albeit in a decidedly warped way), and it is to him that Furiae’s gaze, thoughts and feelings are helplessly drawn – to her secret shame and horror.

To make matters worse, all three characters seem to be aware of these developments to a certain extent, as the dragon hints in several conversational remarks at different points of the game:

**Dragon:** Inuart strives, yet can hope for no reward. The fool plays at love alone.

**Dragon:** What think you of your sister’s purity? She is the Goddess, yet still a woman.

**Dragon:** The three of you... Have you grown so accustomed to denying the truth?

---


677 Soldier: “To see Lady Furiae dirtied by the desert sands… It is good that the king cannot see us now…” (*Drakengard*).
**Dragon:** Caim. Can you sense your sister's thoughts? The passions of her soul?  

As the story progresses and the protagonists’ situation grows ever more perilous, the delicate balance of this elaborate game of pretend is destroyed as each character begins to buckle under the strain of a role they cannot possibly fulfill. Inuart, who cannot bear his role as Furiae’s chaste servant and his growing awareness of the turn her affections have taken, becomes easy prey for the Cult of the Watchers, who seek to use the Goddess for their own twisted ends. When he is captured and forced to confront the truth of his own impossible desires, Inuart’s already frayed mind shatters, becoming a pliable pawn to the cultists.

The rendition of Inuart’s descent into madness bears a strong resemblance to classical tragedy and drama in general. The scene itself is non-interactive, forcing the player into the position of a witness, perhaps even a voyeur, to Inuart’s inner turmoil. Like a minimalist stage play, the scene is set in a darkened space, with a single shaft of light illuminating the character from above. Since Inuart is bound to a torture rack by his hands and feet, the scene is practically devoid of movement, thus placing all emphasis on the spoken dialogue as a monotonous, incorporeal voice reveals the extent of Inuart’s self-deception:

**Inuart:** If only I had more strength…
**Voice:** If only I had more strength… Then I could protect Furiae.
**Inuart:** Who’s there?
**Voice:** I could protect her and make her my own.
**Inuart:** Stop it!
**Voice:** Take her in my arms. Surrender her to no man. My betrothed. She shall love only me.
**Inuart:** Please stop...
**Voice:** All mine. Furiae, all mine. All mine. All mine. No man can have her. No man. Not even Caim.
**Inuart:** No! No more!
**Voice:** Loves only me. Looks only to me. Holds only me. Furiae. Loves only me, me.

Me. Me. Forgive me. Deeply. Deeply. Please forgive me.

(Inuart *screams*)

A similar, though more dynamic scene occurs later in the game, when Furiae – now captured by the cult – is also forced to confront her innermost desires. Pinned against a sacrificial altar by an invisible force, Furiae is unable to do more than protest weakly as the cult’s child priestess, Manah, speaks aloud Furiae’s innermost feelings and lays her mind bare for a horrified one-person audience: Caim, who is frozen to the

---

678 *Drakengard.*
679 *Drakengard.*
spot at this outpouring of revelations, for once unable to retreat into the comforting mindlessness of battle.

**Manah:** *(reading Furiae’s mind)* What’s this? This… dirt?

**Furiae:** No, don’t…

**Manah:** *(speaking Furiae’s thoughts aloud)* Forget the seal and help me! Forget the seal and help me! Stupid man! Please, help me! Help me! Please… hold me, my brother.

**Furiae:** Stop it!

**Manah:** I can see into your heart.

**Furiae:** No, no. That’s not true! You lie!

**Manah:** *(speaking Furiae’s thoughts aloud)* I hate you! I hate you! Filth! This world needs destroying!

**Furiae:** No!

**Manah:** *(speaking Furiae’s thoughts aloud)* I’m dirty! I’m dirty! I’m no Goddess. I renounce it. Please, please, my brother…

**Furiae:** I’m sorry.680

For Inuart and Furiae, their respective confrontation with the futility of their own dreams and desires, the true discrepancy between their inner lives and outer reality, proves to be their undoing. Consumed with jealousy, desperation and longing, Inuart latches onto the Cult’s tantalizing promise of an easy way out of suffering, and accepts their offer of “strength” – the physical power he believes is necessary to save his beloved from her fate as the Goddess and to regain the affection and gratitude which her brother has (unwittingly) usurped. Thus freed from the shackles of timidity and deference, Inuart allows himself to indulge in his deepest, darkest desires – besting Caim in combat, staking claim to Furiae (by forcing a kiss on her683), and giving himself over to the fantasy of acting as her hero and savior – never realizing that he has only succeeded in becoming a delusional abductor instead. In contrast, the revelation of her inner truth drives Furiae into a corner. Unlike Inuart, she is aware of the impossibility of her desires, and has simply hoped to suppress them well enough to convincingly act the part of the good sister and benevolent Goddess. However, being shown the extent of her failures, and worse, having her brother learn of her secret selfishness and incestuous desires drives her to despair: Before Caim is able to stop her, Furiae lunges for one of the ceremonial daggers present at the scene and plunges it deep into her heart, thereby dooming the world (since the other seals have been destroyed by the Empire). With her dying breath, she

---

680 *Drakengard.*

683 *Drakengard.*
begs her brother not to look at her, terrified to the last of facing his rejection.\textsuperscript{682}

\textit{Drakengard} deliberately subverts or outright rejects the conventions of chivalric romance and happy endings which are present in fantasy fiction in general, and (fantasy) videogames in particular. The prevalence of said conventions is mainly due to various influences from popular culture as well as the game industry’s orientation towards a male demographic; hence, games tend to feature male protagonists and heavily rely on the theme of saving the damsel in distress in order to give context to the challenges the player will be asked to master, to provide motivation and a reward for both the protagonist and the player, whose heroic deeds usually win the damsel’s affections in the end.\textsuperscript{683} The convention is so well-established and recognized that it is capable of supporting entire franchises, most famously \textit{Super Mario} and \textit{The Legend of Zelda}. Both game series, which are among the longest-standing franchises in videogame history to date (first released in 1985 and 1986), have continuously reinvented themselves over the past 25 years by developing new, engaging play mechanics and ever-changing settings, yet the core of their narratives has remained the same. Their protagonists, Mario and Link, are eternally engaged in the struggle of saving the damsel – Princesses Toadstool/Peach and Zelda, respectively – from the villain’s clutches. The journey might take the protagonist/player through time, to another dimension, the realm of dreams, into outer space, or into the body of a humanoid dinosaur, but the motivation for doing so and the outcome of the story (rescuing the princess) have remained almost unchanged. In both cases, the princesses are relegated to largely passive roles despite their tremendous magical powers, hoping for the aid of a gallant hero to free them from imprisonment and/or an untimely demise just like the sacrificial maidens of myths and fairy tales. \textit{Drakengard}, however, de-romanticizes and deconstructs the rigid roles imposed upon the characters by this age-old dynamic by highlighting the amount of (self-)denial said roles require. In order to fulfill the role of the pure sacrificial maiden, Furiae has to deny any and all sexual urges, personal desires, and unkind or selfish thoughts, something she is increasingly unable to do the more suffering and silence she is forced to endure. Inuart, who is not blessed with the physical strength and mental disposition to actually fight for her sake as a proper knight would, cannot bear the cost of his inadequacies (i.e. the loss of Furiae’s love), which leads him to try and take by force what he cannot earn through heroic

\textsuperscript{682} \textit{Drakengard}.

\textsuperscript{683} Cf. for example Alyson E. King, and Aziz Douai, “From the ‘Damsel in Distress’ to Girls’ Games and Beyond,” \textit{Gender Considerations and Influence in the Digital Media and Gaming Industry}, ed. Julie Prescott and Julie Elizabeth McGurren (Hershey: IGI Global, 2014) 1-17.
deeds. And Caim, though he possesses the strength to fight, does so mainly for selfish reasons (i.e. his thirst for revenge) and, as Furiae’s brother, cannot possibly fulfill the role of the hero upon whom she bestows her affections. In short, Drakengard’s characters do not slowly descend into madness. Rather, theirs is a sudden, dramatic plunge right into the heart of an emotional abyss, brought about when their own inner truths are externalized, destroying all hope of continuing to fulfill the roles – the selfless goddess, the devout servant – to which they have tried so hard to adhere.

Moreover, the player, who is intimately familiar with the type of narrative which forms the foundation of Drakengard, is not only confronted with characters whose sanity is destroyed in the attempt to fit into the idealized roles of fantasy and fairy tales, but is made to realize that the web of madness and despair is far too tightly woven to allow for a traditional happy ending. The game allows the player to explore five different story paths in sequence by fulfilling certain conditions (e.g. completing levels within a time limit), but always denies them a conclusion on a positive note. In fact, each successive ending is bleaker, madder and objectively “worse”: In the first ending, the world is saved at the cost of the dragon’s life, whose love for Caim compels her to offer herself as the new seal in order to halt the disintegration of reality. In the second ending, Inuart manages to place Furiae’s corpse inside one of the magical devices which appear after the destruction of the seals, hoping to resurrect her. Miraculously, Furiae emerges from the device alive, but transformed into a terrible, mindless creature that only desires destruction. When Caim finally manages to slay his sister to grant her peace, he discovers that the magical devices now scattered all across the world have begun to release copies of the monstrous Goddess, whose birth fills the air with their terrible shrieking. In yet another ending, reality itself collapses completely, releasing grotesqueries shaped like giant human infants, which set about devouring the entire world as the protagonists die fighting against their overwhelming numbers. No matter how much the player strives and successfully fights their way through the game, the world of Drakengard still descends into madness and chaos. In this sense, the player is also trapped in a role – the role of the traditional player, who expects their effort and skill to yield a traditional reward (i.e. a happy ending) – and no matter how much they might desire to avoid the inevitable madness and chaos, they cannot, unless they stop playing the game altogether.
7.3.2. *Spec Ops: The Line* and Aspirations towards Heroism

Another deconstruction of the hero that arises from the clash between the protagonist’s internal and external reality is offered by *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), a third-person military shooter. The game is set in a ruined version of Dubai, which has fallen victim to climate change and increasing desertification. A massive, ceaselessly blowing sandstorm has engulfed the region, leaving countless of the poorest inhabitants stranded within the city limits. Stranded alongside them is the fictional 33rd Infantry Battalion of the US Army, led by Colonel John Konrad, who disobeyed orders to retreat out of a refusal to abandon the destitute civilians to their fate. With all air travel and communications disrupted ever since, the fate of the battalion and the civilian survivors under their protection remains a mystery. Six months after the loss of all contact, the storm weakens just enough to allow for a cryptic radio transmission to penetrate to the outside world: “This is Colonel John Konrad, United States Army. Attempted evacuation of Dubai ended in complete failure. Death toll... too many.” The player assumes the role of Martin Walker, a US Delta Force captain who has been instructed to lead a three-man reconnaissance unit into Dubai to ascertain the presence of survivors. Upon their arrival in the sand-choked city, Walker and his two subordinates, Lugo and Adams, find a scene of utter chaos that far exceeds the scope of a natural disaster. Amidst dwindling resources, looting, riots and isolation, as well as armed insurgents attacking with abandon, the 33rd seems to have fallen apart, its members scattering into small groups who have even begun feuding amongst themselves. Walker, who deeply respects and admires Konrad from time spent under his command during the war in Afghanistan, refuses to believe that the colonel would condone such behavior, and decides to abandon his own mission in favor of taking up a personal one: He will find Konrad in the ruins of Dubai in order to hear the truth from his own mouth.

So far, so standard. On the surface, *The Line* follows the storytelling conventions of the vast majority of military shooter games, which see a lone American soldier undertake missions to either save the US from an outside threat – a threat which is usually based on real-world terrorist organizations (e.g. Al Qaeda) or nations engaged in some form of past or present diplomatic or military conflict with the US (e.g. North Korea, USSR/Russia, Iraq) – or to liberate another country from some kind of military threat or oppressive regime (e.g. Vietnam, Honduras, the former Yugoslavia, or the entirety of World War II-era Europe). As Nick Robinson notes, military shooter games often draw on ideas of American

---

684 Hereafter referred to as *The Line* for the sake of brevity.

exceptionalism and tend to “portray the USA as uniquely able to respond to (and defeat) the threats facing both itself and those facing the rest of the world and, therefore, as having a responsibility to protect other threatened countries.” In essence, games of this genre are power fantasies, and are framed accordingly: The primary (and often only) means of interaction is through armed combat, the virtual worlds are populated almost exclusively by clearly defined, morally unambiguous “good guys” and “bad guys,” and many of the consequences of real warfare, such as human suffering, atrocities or civilian casualties, are notably absent, unless they are perpetrated by “the other side.” According to Tanine Allison, they reflect “the fantasy of what modern war is: clean, precise, fast-paced, and with quantifiable success. [They] present war as something that can be controlled and mastered, without post-traumatic stress disorder or real death.”

The Spec Ops series (1998–present), of which The Line is the latest installment, is no exception. As its title and genre designation indicate, it focuses on armed combat and wartime simulations, set in various parts of 20th/21st-century Earth. The player takes on the role of an American soldier (usually a blank-slate character) who is tasked with missions in various real-world countries known for past or present armed conflicts, which usually involve the conquest of strategic locations, the culling of enemy forces, and/or the rescue of civilian or other NPCs. However, The Line deviates substantially from its own series formula. Drawing inspiration from Joseph Conrad’s 1899 novella Heart of Darkness and Francis Ford Coppola’s Apocalypse Now (1979), the entire game functions as an extensive criticism of the military shooter genre, as well as of the way war is often framed in American (popular) culture: a good, just fight against an unimaginable evil. There is no glory or honor to be found in Dubai, no victory for either its protagonist or its player. Walker’s self-imposed goal of finding Konrad comes at the cost of nothing less than his sanity—not due to the horrors of war he witnesses, but due to the terrible deeds he slowly comes to commit based

---

687 Tanine Allison, “The World War II Video Game, Adaptation, and Postmodern History,” Literature/Film Quarterly 38.3 (2010): 192. It should be noted that Allison’s use of the phrase “real death” is not ideal, given that videogames and all they contain are virtual by default and that any interaction occurring within a game – video- or otherwise – takes place in a space and/or context of controlled unreality (see the concept of the magic circle). It might be better to speak of “narratively meaningful” or “narratively impactful” death here.
on his own rash decisions and his dwindling ability to reconcile his own self-image as a good, heroic soldier with their results.

a) Heroic (Self-)Construction, Heroic (Self-)Deception

The function and presentation of madness in *Spec Ops: The Line* occurs on two different but intertwined levels: the narrative level, i.e. the story of Walker's journey, and a secondary, meta-narrative level which explicitly addresses and engages with the player as *a player*, meaning it is designed to initiate a process of self-reflection on the player's in-game behavior and to encourage a critical attitude towards the genre of military shooters. The madness which comes to grow and fester in the character of Walker as a result of the irreconcilable differences between his self-image and his external reality also fulfills the meta-function of deceiving the player, encouraging them to believe they are partaking in yet another exaggerated heroic power fantasy, only to systematically chip away at this perception until the player runs out of room for pretending.

In the beginning, Walker's self-image and his self-presentation (i.e. his words and actions) appear to be in perfect alignment. He is portrayed as efficient, clean-cut and serious, holding the military in high regard yet admiring soldiers who will hold fast to their personal convictions and act for the greater good, sometimes even against orders. This is expressed in his opening monologue, in which Walker declares his deep respect for Konrad as a soldier and defends the colonel’s insubordination against unseen (possibly civilian) critics with an unmistakable air of contempt:

> Is John Konrad the greatest man I ever served with? Well, I dunno. There was this one time in Kabul where he dragged my bleeding carcass half a mile to an evac chopper. So maybe I’m biased. But the facts don’t lie. The man’s a fucking hero. Remember when the first storms hit Dubai? You were probably all safe and sound at home watching TV. Well, Konrad was leading the “Damned” 33rd out of Afghanistan. Instead of coming home, he volunteered his entire battalion to help with the evac. Bet all you did was send a check.\(^{689}\)

Walker’s decision to commit insubordination and venture into Dubai despite having no clear understanding of the situation fits his personal definition of heroic behavior, i.e. that strong, righteous convictions justify disobedience – in this case, his conviction that Colonel Konrad is not to blame for the chaos in the city and his strict adherence to the philosophy of the US military to “leave no man

---

\(^{689}\) *The Line.*
Furthermore, it is strongly implied via Walker’s frequent reminiscences of Kabul that he believes in the archaic concept of the life debt, and thus sees the mission in Dubai as his chance to repay it by saving Konrad’s life in turn. Although it quickly becomes apparent that the Delta team are woefully unprepared to face the chaos of the city and that the rescue of 33rd soldiers is nigh on impossible when said soldiers are at war with not just the insurgents, but each other, Walker quells any suggestions of turning back by reminding his men of their duty to their comrades and invoking the admirable figure of Colonel Konrad: “Orders ain’t worth following if it means leaving people to die, Lugo. Konrad’s still alive, I think he is… I know he’d agree with me.”

Although Walker struggles with the slow realization that many of the attacks on Delta are either carried out by civilians who have mistaken them for members of the 33rd, or various feuding groups of 33rd soldiers who believe them to belong to an opposing faction, he continues to fight with brutal efficiency (e.g. stabbing or slitting enemies’ throats with his combat knife) and encourages his men to do the same with glib interjections such as, “Gentlemen! Less talking, more shooting!” The only way for the player to catch a glimpse of Walker’s doubts and reservations is through his personal notes, which act as menu descriptions of the various items that can be found throughout the game, such as documents and abandoned personal belongings. For example, a rag doll, left behind in the basement of a half-buried hotel, is accompanied by the following text:

Found a doll in the O. Z. No way it’s left over from the old days. Diamond earrings for eyes. Silk for a dress. This was made after the storm wall fell. That means children. Families. I’m starting to wonder about our enemy. We’re not that far from Konrad’s failed evac. Could these be the survivors? Are we killing the people we came here to save? I’m not gonna tell Adams or Lugo… Shit’s hot enough as it is. They don’t need this weight on ‘em too. Anyone shooting at us is an enemy… whether they got families or not...

This entry, as well as others like it, shows that although Walker is beginning to reevaluate his initial assumptions, he is not willing to act on these realizations in any meaningful way, e.g. by retreating from Dubai and returning to the original mission (“Locate survivors, leave the city immediately, radio command..."

---

691 The Line.
692 The Line.
693 The Line.
from outside the storm wall. They send in the cavalry, we go home\textsuperscript{694}, by contacting command for instructions, or by trying to refrain from using lethal force in favor of diplomacy. Instead, his concerns are overruled by his self-perception, i.e. that of an honorable soldier on an honorable mission, which frames his actions as justified and their consequences as inevitable sacrifices in service to a “higher cause” (regardless of the fact that his “cause” of finding Konrad is largely a personal one).

Walker’s self-narrative also influences the player’s self-narrative and -perception, which is already shaped by the game’s genre and associated conventions, as well as by \textit{The Line}’s deliberately misleading design. As mentioned above, military shooters overwhelmingly favor and enforce the narrative of the heroic (US) soldier fighting in foreign conflicts, meaning that the player – especially if they are familiar with the genre – already approaches \textit{The Line} with a certain set of expectations about their in-game role, as well as the moral and ideological position it entails. In addition, the player is automatically predisposed to following the rules of any game they play, since acting within the constraints of the rules is a core requirement of games in general, and the skill with which one does so is its own reward. In short, the player is predisposed to regarding their rule-bound actions within the game as positive. Since \textit{The Line} is a military shooter, the player has no reason not to believe that the game expects them to behave as they would in any other military shooter, simply taking down the targets that appear in front of them.\textsuperscript{695} For almost a third of its duration, \textit{The Line} takes great care to strengthen the normalcy of this course of action with its extremely ordinary play mechanics and mission design. The-player-as-Walker and his two AI-controlled companions cautiously move from cover to cover, replenish their limited ammunition and resources from abandoned supply caches and dead combatants, and are time and again forced into skirmishes against the local insurgents (whom they initially believe to be responsible for most of the destruction) and later hostile factions of the 33rd. The layout of the city makes it difficult to gain an overview of the situation as communications are disrupted, a thick, dusty haze lingers everywhere, the sand has buried anything resembling roads or pathways, and the city-wide pandemonium of half-collapsed buildings, gutted vehicles, barricades, scattered army supplies and personal belongings makes it impossible to discern the true extent of the hostilities. Firefights are fast and chaotic as the protagonists are faced

\textsuperscript{694} \textit{The Line}.

\textsuperscript{695} This idea is progressively undermined as the game begins to portray these impersonal targets as human beings: There are many points during the game where Walker/the player becomes privy to various small conversations among rogue 33rd soldiers or the native insurgents which show them thinking about their families, voicing their fears or encouraging one another, and even finding small moments of beauty in the ruined city such as the colors of the sunset filtered through the sandstorm haze. \textit{The Line}.
with guerilla tactics, overwhelming numbers, exploding grenades and mortar fire. In fact, the game opens in medias res to a scene of utter pandemonium: The player is thrust into the middle of an aerial battle, taking control of Walker as he mans the minigun in the back of a military helicopter that is weaving in and out between the destroyed skyscrapers of storm-battered Dubai, pursued by multiple aircraft. No context is provided and no explanation of the circumstances is given, which leaves the player in the dark with regard as to whom exactly they are fighting and why. Yet, the-player-as-Walker must keep firing regardless in order to live long enough to even arrive at the chronological beginning of the story. In short, the game encourages a “shoot first, ask questions later” response by meeting the player with a steady stream of confusing situations which require constant alertness and quick reflexes, and which leave neither the player nor the characters themselves much time to develop elaborate strategies or regain their bearings. In The Line, the chaos and brutality of battle are normal, familiar and expected. Bullet- and explosion-riddled battlefields are entirely expected sights and experiences in a military shooter, as is the idea that enemies must be dispatched as swiftly and efficiently as possible in order to advance, reminiscent of a shooting gallery. The Line is content to let the player proceed while enveloped in this false sense of security, essentially inviting them to disregard any evidence to the contrary.696 The player’s perspective is only strengthened by Martin Walker’s self-narrative, which repeatedly and insistently frames the proceedings as proper and just. Since Walker is not overly concerned with disregarding orders or charging into Dubai without the necessary information, neither is the player, whose familiarity with the maverick protagonist from countless action films, comics, and other videogames is likely to contribute to the perception that Walker’s (and thus, their own) actions are a perfectly normal part of the heroic fantasy.

b) Justifying the Unjustifiable

Although Walker’s justifications begin to ring increasingly hollow with every reiteration, they hold up until one pivotal moment which has achieved considerable notoriety as the “White Phosphorus Scene.” This scene, or rather, this scenario, marks The Line’s departure from the military shooter genre and its descent into psychological horror as Walker finally crosses the titular line, committing to a course of action whose consequences cannot be reconciled with the ideal of a heroic savior. The team comes across a heavily guarded compound held by a rogue faction of the 33rd Battalion. In order to break through,  

696 For example, many hostile encounters show the supposedly ruthless insurgents to be primarily motivated by fear, attacking because they believe Walker’s team to be a part of the 33rd.
Walker opts to make use of a nearby mortar loaded with white phosphorus, determined to wipe out the enemy in one fell swoop even under the protest of his squad mates:

**Lugo:** You’re fuckin’ kidding me, right? That’s white phosphorus.
**Walker:** (sharply) Yeah, I know what it is.
**Lugo:** You’ve seen what this shit does! You know we can’t use it—
**Walker:** We don’t have a choice.
**Lugo:** There’s always a choice.
**Walker:** No, there’s really not.697

And indeed, the player is also left with no choice as the game switches from third-person perspective to a grainy overhead view of the compound as seen through the eyes of the electronic targeting system. As Walker, the player has to move the targeting cursor around the screen, aiming for vehicles and soldiers alike, watching as the screen of the guidance computer lights up with brilliant flare after brilliant flare, agonized screams erupting in the distance. The presentation echoes aerial bombardment scenes from countless other genre titles such as *Call of Duty*, *Halo*, *Battlefield* or *Medal of Honor*, yet *The Line* is determined to show the consequences of this remote form of killing: In order to advance, the team has to walk through the incinerated compound, now littered with dead and mortally wounded American soldiers, writhing on the ground in pain from their burns and missing limbs, or weakly attempting to drag themselves to safety. It is in the very back of the area, however, that the most awful discovery awaits: Far from being the stronghold of a group of murderous traitors, the location is, in fact, a fortified refugee camp which has been maintained and protected by a non-hostile group of 33rd soldiers. A cut-scene ensures that the player cannot miss a single horrifying detail as Walker and his men gaze in shock upon dozens of dead civilians, the flesh burnt from their bones from a direct hit with a phosphorus grenade, a charred tableau of agony and terror.

In contrast to Lugo and Adams, who react with open horror, visceral anger and guilt, blaming Walker for pushing for the use of the phosphorus weapon and themselves for going along with it, Walker surveys the scene in quiet shock, lingering on the corpse of a mother clutching her child as his vision swims and his subordinates’ argument fades to a dull roar in the background. Although he seems to recover quickly enough, silencing his men by ordering them to move before reinforcements arrive, in truth, the attack leaves Walker shaken to the core. It threatens to destroy the identity he has built for

697 *The Line.*
himself, a good soldier who only kills in rational, controllable, ethically justifiable ways. In order to hold on to this self-perception, Walker subconsciously begins to alter the narrative which has led him to Dubai in the first place – originally convinced of Konrad’s innocence and determined to save as many of his fellow soldiers as possible, Walker now suspects that his team has been set up, that his team has been under surveillance ever since they entered the city, and that someone deliberately left behind the phosphorus mortar to coax them into using it (“They [the 33rd] made us do this!”). These more or less dubious assumptions are apparently confirmed when the team stumbles across another gruesome discovery in a nearby hotel: a row of corpses shackled to chairs, killed in the style of an execution. As Walker tries to make sense of the situation, an abandoned radio crackles to life, Konrad’s voice filtering through with a laconic sigh:

**Konrad:** I could not inspire them. They led a mutiny. Foolish in a place like this. I don’t blame them. They did what they thought was necessary. But if order was to be maintained, an example had to be made. [...]  
**Walker:** Colonel, please… what’s going on here?  
**Konrad:** Survival, Captain. Plain and simple. Everything is teetering on the edge of everything. But this you already know. The rest you have to see for yourself. Welcome to Dubai, gentlemen.  

This encounter seems to vindicate Walker’s newfound suspicions and provides the player with a distraction from the aftermath of the phosphorus attack. Although the player is unlikely to agree with Walker’s insistence that he had “no choice” but to use such a terrible weapon, their desire to reclaim the role of the heroic protagonist is likely to be rekindled by the appearance of an obvious villain: Konrad seems well on his way to turning the city into his private post-apocalyptic kingdom, so Walker’s insistence on finding and holding him accountable for his crimes aligns with the player’s familiarity with and desire for the typical hero’s journey.

The betrayal of his former idol gives Walker renewed reason to push deeper into the city, and the player a renewed sense of purpose: hunting a dastardly villain. Throughout, Konrad maintains radio contact and comments on Walker’s progress, thereby lending credence to Walker’s assertion that the Delta squad has been set up and is being watched. In fact, Konrad seems to have decided that Walker is a
kindred spirit, which he expresses by alternately lecturing Walker on the realities and necessities of
“maintaining order,” proudly showing off the horrors of his reign, regretfully reminiscing on his own
failures in an attempt to unburden himself or appeal to Walker’s sympathy, provoking or encouraging
Walker to find him, and chipping away at Walker’s reason by twisting his words in an attempt to show
him how alike they both truly are:

- You must think that I’m a monster… that I’ve gone insane. I came to terms with what
  I am a long time ago, Captain. What about you?
- Home? We can’t go home. There’s a line men like us have to cross. If we’re lucky, we
do what’s necessary, then we die. No, all I really want, Captain, is peace.
- You aren’t the first man they sent to find me… I doubt you’ll be the last.
- This is Dubai, Captain. This is what I face every day. My duty is to maintain order.
  Without it, we would have died long ago.701

Moreover, Konrad crafts scenarios which are intended to force Walker to adopt his perspective. For
instance, at one point, he confronts Walker with two men who have been gagged and strung up
underneath a road bridge by their arms. According to Konrad, one man is a thief who stole precious water
— a capital offense in sand-choked Dubai — while the other is the soldier who tried to apprehend him, but
ended up killing the man’s entire family in the process. By training a sniper squad on the Delta team,
Konrad forces Walker to make the choice of who is more deserving of punishment (the decision of whom
to shoot is placed in the player’s hands). In light of Konrad’s brutality, Walker’s earlier use of the white
phosphorus seems to be mitigated, even partially absolved — an honest mistake, to be forgiven or at least
deemed understandable in retrospect, when the person pulling the strings seems to alternately delight in or
think nothing of deliberate slaughter.

It seems almost inevitable that Walker should begin to buckle under the extreme mental strain of
these tests and taunts from his former idol, growing increasingly ruthless and aggressive, jumping at
shadows and barely managing to keep his temper in check whenever Konrad presents him with a new
snippet of his philosophy on order, duty, justice, leadership and accountability. Corresponding to these
changes in his attitude and behavior, Walker’s physical appearance begins to deteriorate until any
resemblance to the tidy, clean-cut character from the start of the game is gone. Although this is nominally
due to the grueling combat activities, it also serves as a physical representation of the character’s fraying

701 The Line.
sanity and his unraveling morality: His uniform becomes torn and grimy, his face is streaked with dirt and blood which he does not bother to wipe off, visible injuries are poorly dressed or remain unattended to altogether.

Concurrently to the protagonist’s physical and mental deterioration, The Line uses an array of methods to place the player into a similar state of turmoil, guilt and anger. This serves to not only bind the protagonist and the player together on an emotional level, but also to force the player to reflect on their engagement with the game itself and the conventions of the genre it represents. One of these methods is the game’s overtly strange mix of situational freedom of choice and “railroading,” i.e. not giving the player a choice on the course of action but still requiring them to execute said action. In the white phosphorus scene, for example, the player does not have a choice – unless they decide to stop playing the game altogether due to ethical concerns (an unlikely outcome given that the genre rarely deals with ethical concerns), they have to fire the mortar in order to proceed. According to The Line’s writer, Walt Williams, “[W]e wanted the player to be in the same emotional position as Walker. We wanted the player to be where Walker was and be angry at us, the people who made them do this.” Notably, the aim is not just to invoke the anger and outrage of a spectator, but to implicitly encourage the player to assign blame for the massacre to someone other than themselves, i.e. the developers, in an eerie echo of Walker’s hollow-voiced assertions that “They made us do this!” and “You brought this on yourselves!” At other times, however, The Line provides the player with several courses of action to choose from, albeit without giving the player enough information to realize they even have these choices. For example, when Konrad presents Walker with the two captives and orders him to decide whom to shoot, the player does not have to commit to the execution – they can attempt to save either or both men by shooting their ropes or try to take out Konrad’s snipers in an extremely difficult firefight (in both cases, the captives die at the snipers’ hands instead). Since these alternatives are not made obvious to the player, and, at least in the latter scenario, extremely difficult to accomplish, the player may be tricked into believing that they have no alternative, thereby unwittingly adopting Walker’s perspective of not having a choice. Other choice scenarios rely on the player being driven by destructive emotions: For instance, late in the game, the squad are separated from one another in a helicopter crash (the outcome of the opening sequence). Before they


703 The Line.
can reconvene, an injured Lugo is cornered and lynched by a mob of furious civilians. When Walker and Adams come across the scene, they futilely try to resuscitate their comrade while the civilians huddle and jeer, some moving closer to brandish makeshift weapons (sticks and rocks) at the Delta squad. The game transitions from cut-scene to gameplay at a critical moment, namely right as emotions are running high among the team as a grief-stricken Adams yells “I wanna take them, Walker!” and “Sir, permission to open fire!”\textsuperscript{704}, and the player also emotionally compromised from Lugo’s senseless death, the game transitions from cut-scene back to gameplay, expecting the player to take measures to get past the crowd of civilians. Once again, the player is not informed of any alternative courses of action; the assumption is that they must fire at the civilians in order to clear a path (a decision encouraged by Adams), although it is entirely possible to scatter the crowd by harmlessly shooting into the air. The choice of whether or not to shoot non-combatants therefore hinges solely on the player’s ability and, more importantly, their willingness to think of alternatives.\textsuperscript{705} In addition to these ambiguous moments of choice, the game also addresses the player directly. Following the phosphorus bombardment, the game begins to display provocative meta-textual statements during loading screens, ranging from taunts and sarcastic admonishments to chilling reminders:

- Freedom is what you do with what’s been done to you.
- Can you even remember why you came here?
- To kill for yourself is murder. To kill for your government is heroic. To kill for entertainment is harmless.
- You are still a good person.
- Do you feel like a hero yet?
- The US military does not condone the killing of unarmed combatants. But this isn’t real, so why should you care?\textsuperscript{706}

These and other unsettling words aim at dispelling the heroic fantasy inherent to most military shooters, which subsists on the aforementioned neat divide between “good guys” and “bad guys” and automatically categorizes the player/protagonist’s actions as beyond reproach. The statements also remind the player of

\textsuperscript{704} The Line.
\textsuperscript{705} The Line.
\textsuperscript{706} The Line.
their complicity in Walker’s actions, the responsibility they have unwittingly taken on by choosing to go ever onward.

c) “None of This Would’ve Happened if You’d Just Stopped”: 707 Madness and the Reality of Heroism

As the game draws to its climax, Walker starts to display symptoms of an impending mental breakdown. They manifest in his increasingly irrational responses to Konrad’s taunts, such as vowing to “make the 33rd pay” and stating that “Konrad deserves to die” 708 in a complete reversal of his original goals and his initial reverent defense of the colonel. In addition, Walker commits to more rash courses of action in an attempt to take revenge on Konrad, easily the worst of which is an ill-informed attempt to wrest control of the city’s water supply from the 33rd, which results in the inadvertent destruction of the main reservoir and essentially condemns the survivors to slowly die of thirst. Even more alarming signals of Walker’s psychological fragility are the flashbacks and hallucinations he begins to experience at random intervals in the middle of combat. More than once, the sounds of explosions cause the entire scenery to become temporarily engulfed in the white-hot flames of phosphorus while his teammates simply walk on, unperturbed. Several times, he freezes up during firefights, convinced that the enemy combatants are actually people he knows. At one point, while separated from his team inside an abandoned shopping mall, Walker fires on a collection of store mannequins, believing them to be hostile forces, 709 and only regains his senses when Adams radioes in to ask what he is doing. An especially harrowing incident occurs shortly after Lugo’s lynching, when Walker suffers a hallucination in which his dead comrade comes back to life and begins attacking Walker in retaliation for failing to save him in time. His screams of rage and betrayal are, of course, expressions of Walker’s own conscience (“You’re no fucking hero! This is all your fault! Yours!” 710). Although Walker tries to quiet this expression of his conscience by arguing against Lugo’s accusations, the illusion proves to be incredibly powerful: During the ensuing firefight, Walker can easily be hurt and even shot to death by the hallucination (which catapults Walker back to reality).

Although these are all unmistakable signs of a mind that is well past fraying at the edges, they are

707 The Line.

708 The Line.

709 In terms of gameplay, these mannequins manifest as very real soldiers whose gunfire can cause physical harm to Walker; whenever Walker/the player shoots these apparitions, they revert back into inanimate objects.

710 The Line.
by no means the core of Walker’s madness. Said core’s existence is only revealed at the very end when Walker finally comes face to face with the man whose voice has been tormenting him in every waking hour, mocking him for his failures, undermining his principles and generally delighting in Walker’s helpless fury. With his comrades dead and MIA, Walker manages to stagger into the Burj Kalifa, Konrad’s hideout, as a shadow of himself: ragged, exhausted, and utterly alone. Strangely, there he is greeted by a contingent of soldiers standing at attention who claim to be the last remnants of the 33rd and surrender to Walker with the words, “Dubai is yours, sir.” Walker is left to ascend to the highest floor, where Konrad is waiting for him inside a luxury apartment, serenely working on an oil painting.

**Konrad:** No matter how hard I tried, I never could escape the reality of what happened here. That was my downfall.

[Konrad steps away from the painting, which is revealed to be a scene from Walker’s own memories, showing the civilians dying in the phosgene attack. Front and center are the mother and her child, preserved in the moment before the flames engulf them fully, their eyes wide with pain and horror.]

**Konrad:** There, finished. I hope you like it.

**Walker:** What the hell is going on?

**Konrad:** *(gently)* Your eyes are opening for the first time. It hurts, doesn’t it. Go on. What do you think?

[Walker gazes at the painting in utter incomprehension.]

**Walker:** …You did this.

**Konrad:** No, you did. Your orders killed 47 innocent people.

*(sharply)* Someone has to pay for your crimes, Walker. Who’s it gonna be? With this cryptic declaration, Konrad moves behind the painting and out onto a balcony. Yet, when Walker tries to follow him, the balcony is shown to be empty except for a chair pulled up to its very edge. Turning it around reveals a hideously shriveled corpse in a faded colonel’s uniform, a handgun still held within its grasp: Konrad has been dead all along, his life ended by his own hand months before Walker ever entered the picture, crushed by the weight of his failures in Dubai.

This revelation radically alters the entire game in several important respects. For one, it reveals Walker’s self-imposed mission to be a fool’s errand, a heroic fantasy (first of saving Konrad, later of bringing Konrad to justice), for whose fulfillment he has sacrificed the lives of his comrades, murdered

---

711 *The Line.*

712 *The Line.*

713 The exact circumstances of Konrad’s suicide are kept deliberately vague, though his motivations can be inferred from a brief message addressed to his son: “Jeremy. Someday, people will tell you about your father. For that, I’m sorry. I love you” *(The Line).*
dozens civilians and countless US soldiers, as well as doomed thousands of survivors to a slow and painful death through the destruction of the city’s water supply. Every decision Walker has made throughout the game is now shown to be utterly meaningless, stripped of even the faintest semblance of justification; every death at his hands is rendered an act of pointless slaughter committed on nothing but good intentions and Walker’s conviction that he was doing “the right thing.”

For another, the revelation presents the onset of Walker's madness, namely his hallucinations and progressive deterioration, in an entirely new light. They are no longer expressions of a mind driven to the breaking point by external forces (i.e. Konrad and the chaos of Dubai), but expressions of a mind driven to the breaking point by itself, bent on maintaining its self-image as a good person, a good soldier, and the hero of its own story at any cost. As Walker gazes at the colonel's corpse, the hallucination of Konrad rises again from the depths of his consciousness to speak the truth Walker has so fiercely denied for so long:

Konrad: It seems that reports of my survival have been greatly exaggerated.
Walker: This isn’t possible…!
Konrad: Oh, I assure you it is.
Walker: How?
Konrad: Not “how.” Why. You were never meant to come here.
[as he speaks, numerous flashbacks of Walker’s deeds and failures are shown in quick succession, including his futile attempt to resuscitate Lugo, his often brutal killing of enemy soldiers, and, most prominently, a close-up of the horrifically burned refugee woman clutching her terrified child]
Walker: (desperately) This isn’t my fault!
Konrad: You are no savior. Your talents lie elsewhere.
[as he speaks, numerous flashbacks of Walker's deeds and failures are shown in quick succession, including his futile attempt to resuscitate Lugo, his often brutal killing of enemy soldiers, and, most prominently, a close-up of the horrifically burned refugee woman clutching her terrified child]
Walker: (desperately) This isn’t my fault!
Konrad: It takes a strong man to deny what is right in front of him. And if the truth is undeniable, you create your own.
[flashback to the scene at the road bridge, this time showing what really happened: Lugo and Adams are reacting in bewilderment, calling out to Walker, who is staring up at two corpses in advanced stages of decomposition, perceiving them as alive and Konrad as having placed them there as a “test” for Walker]
Konrad: The truth, Walker, is that you’re here because you wanted to feel like something you are not: a hero. I’m here because you can’t accept what you’ve done.

[flashback of Walker picking up the radio at the execution site, which is now clearly shown to be broken, and initiating a one-sided conversation with Konrad, much to the confusion of his subordinates, who cannot seem to decide if their commanding officer is asking rhetorical questions to the empty air or not]

Konrad: It broke you. You needed someone to blame, so you cast it on me: a dead man. I know the truth is hard to hear, Walker, but it’s time. You’re all that’s left, and we can’t live this lie forever.714

This cut-scene shows the true extent of Walker’s madness, at whose root lie self-deception and an inability to live with the consequences of his brash decisions. This “core madness,” which has acted as the driving force of Walker’s actions and decisions ever since the white phosphorus bombardment close to the beginning of the game, has helped Walker to maintain the altered self-narrative sprung from his denial, in which he cast Konrad as the murderous mad king of Dubai and himself as the heroic avenger of the mad king’s victims. Still, a deeper part of Walker’s psyche has remained cognizant of the ever-expanding web of lies and fabrications, unable or unwilling to deny his guilt and mounting self-disgust. It is this part which is responsible for the many visual and auditory hallucinations that remind him of his actions, such as the multiple white phosphorus illusions triggered by random explosions or the “conversations” in which Konrad reminds him of the crimes he is trying to deny.715 In essence, Walker’s sanity unravels due to the contradictions between the self-narrative he tries to enforce and the reality of his circumstances. His heroic fantasy, now perpetuated out of sheer need instead of romanticism, has provided only a temporary relief and a basis for still greater mistakes.

The revelation of Walker’s madness also forces the player to reassess their own involvement in the creation of The Line’s narrative. This is markedly different from The Line’s previous attempts to push the player into reflecting critically on the purpose and conventions of the military shooter genre via provocative meta-textual messages during loading screens since it concerns the player’s involvement with The Line specifically. Walker’s madness and madness-induced behavior rob the player of their own heroic self-narrative, i.e. the idea that they are playing as a character whose actions and mistakes can be morally

714 The Line.

715 “There were over five thousand people alive in this city, the day before you arrived. How many are alive today, I wonder? How many will be alive tomorrow? I thought my duty was to protect this city from the storm. I was wrong, I have to protect it from you” (The Line).
justified, or at least seem paltry in comparison to the destructiveness and wanton sadism of an unrepentant villain. Moreover, *The Line* denies the player the standard videogame climax: the final boss fight. Many videogames culminate in a confrontation between the player/protagonist and the primary antagonist, which usually takes the form of a literal or metaphorical duel or battle\(^7\) and often carries an ideological component, i.e. the protagonist’s triumph also implies a triumph of their personal integrity and philosophy versus the villain’s. Since *The Line*’s villain turns out to be a mere fabrication born from the mind of its guilt-ridden main character, there is no one left for the player-as-protagonist to struggle and fight against, neither physically nor ideologically. The player is thus robbed of the satisfaction and implicit moral superiority of “putting the villain in his/her place.”

Moreover, as the player realizes that Walker’s entire journey is senseless and was never even necessary to undertake in the first place, they come to recognize that they have not only become complicit in Walker’s actions, but are also indirectly responsible for the emergence and worsening of his madness. *The Line* uses one of the central aspects of videogame narratives against the player, namely their own drive to proceed, explore, and see the game through to its conclusion. Konrad’s comment – “None of this would’ve happened if you’d just stopped”\(^7\) – can be interpreted as being addressed not only to Walker, but the player themselves. In retrospect, the player becomes aware that this is not the first time the game has featured a subliminal suggestion of “stopping,” i.e. abandoning play altogether. At several key points, the player encounters traffic stop signs placed in the environment in such a manner as to draw the player’s gaze: In fact, a stop sign is the first piece of Dubai that greets the player when they assume control of Walker after the opening credits sequence, innocuously jutting out of the sand at the edge of the destroyed highway leading into the city. A stop sign can also be found at the scene of the phosphorus bombardment, this time streaked with soot and riddled with bullet holes, a silent testament to the player’s decision to proceed against their better judgment.

Similarly, and once again only recognizable in hindsight, the game has continually provided hints at Walker’s worsening delusional state via metaphorical level design and subtle visual tricks. For example, the environment is arranged around the concept of “descent”: Moving from one place to the next usually involves going downwards, e.g. sliding down steep slopes, zip-lining down from higher ground, or rappelling into cavernous underground spaces. This is not only symbolic of Walker/the player “getting in

\(^7\) The closest analogy to the videogame boss fight is the defeat of the antagonist in an action film.

\(^7\) *The Line*. 


deeper” than they could ever have anticipated, but can be read as a gradual decline of or a descent into the depths of Walker’s psyche as well. Doubt is also cast on the accuracy of Walker’s perception via the removal or alteration of small details in the scenery. Many of these visual changes begin to occur long before the turning point of the game, i.e. the white phosphorus attack, after which Walker is suffering from unmistakeable flashbacks and hallucinations. For instance, Walker occasionally passes by plants bearing fresh leaves or small fountains which still contain water, but if the player adjusts the camera to look back on the scenery, the plants have withered and the fountains have cracked and run dry. In addition, Konrad’s image sometimes appears on truck decals and advertising billboards, which slowly increase in size, eventually covering the entire front of a skyscraper. Another ambiguous visual element which appears during key moments is, oddly enough, a herd of oryx antelopes. They can be spotted near the beginning of the game on the outskirts of Dubai, peacefully grazing on sparse vegetation next to rusting vehicles and other human detritus. Although they can be interpreted as part of the scenery at this point, perhaps as a symbol of the desert “reclaiming” the destroyed metropolis, in hindsight, the player will realize that Lugo and Adams do not remark on the animals at all, even though they comment on plenty of other landmarks and activity throughout the game. Walker/the player can even take aim at the oryaxes, killing one and startling the herd into fleeing, which likewise prompts absolutely no reaction from the squad. Thus, whether the animals are actually present or simply part of Walker’s imagination (like the water and green plants) is extremely dubious. Later in the game, however, the oryaxes unexpectedly make an appearance again: After destroying the city’s last remaining water reservoir, Walker regains consciousness in the carnage of the aftermath only to find he has been separated from his team. As he moves to find his comrades and tries to regain his bearings, he catches sight of a lone oryx partially hidden behind a small sand dune, once again seemingly grazing peacefully in the middle of all the carnage. What could be seen as a sign of hope, e.g. nature prevailing even when humans are bent on destruction, is revealed to be something completely different. When Walker reaches the top of the dune, he (and the player) can see what the oryx is feeding on: the corpse of a fallen soldier. This disturbing sight is not only an indication that Walker may simply be imagining the animal, but it can also be seen as a symbol of Dubai, where the natural order has collapsed to a never-before-seen point of savagery, turning even a mild-mannered herbivorous creature into a carnivore. It can even be interpreted as a metaphor for Walker himself — someone who believes himself to be fundamentally good and law-abiding, unaffiliated with the
chaos in the city, but turns out to be someone who metaphorically “feeds” on death and destruction.

Yet another indicator of Walker’s mental state is the use of scene transitions, which distinguish between delusion and reality. According to Williams, “Any time the game is doing a normal transition, it’ll fade to black. Any time Walker is hallucinating, or lying to himself, in a kind of delusional fashion, the game will fade to white.” These visual tricks only achieve their full effect during the climax of the game, when the player is finally confronted with the result of their own desire to play the hero. Disinclined to attach proper significance to these hints – either due to a lack of information, as in the case of Konrad’s face, or due to the ambiguity of presentation – they have bought into the self-narrative of a protagonist who likely has not been of sound mind from the very start, and have pushed ever onward in the firm belief that all of Walker’s deeds and experiences will ultimately be validated and rewarded. Madness in *The Line* is not only the result of the irreconcilable contradiction between the protagonist’s subjective inner reality and objective outer reality, but also a tool used to obscure the fact that such a conflict is present at all.

### 7.4. The Madwoman in the Machine: *Portal 2* and Female Madness

Since videogame development remains a male-dominated industry and particular assumptions about player demographics (i.e. that American players are primarily young, male and white) continue to plague not only videogame research, but also videogame marketing, it is exceedingly rare for a mainstream videogame to feature protagonists (or even major side characters) who are female or belong to an ethnic minority. Due to these circumstances, mainstream games rarely focus on depicting themes or issues which reflect the social, cultural or economic experiences of said groups. Given this, the literary theme of “female madness,” i.e. madness as a reaction to injustice and systemic oppression, is almost entirely absent from videogame narratives. Nevertheless, there is one game which tackles precisely this subject matter: *Portal 2*, the 2011 sequel to an austere first-person puzzle/maze navigation game of the same name.

The story of the first *Portal* game (2007) is fairly straightforward and deeply familiar to science-fiction enthusiasts: The protagonist, a woman named Chell, wakes in an underground laboratory complex

---

718 W. Williams qtd. in Dyer.

as an involuntary test subject and must outwit the malicious supercomputer in charge of the facility in order to survive. The core gameplay revolves around the “Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device,” a futuristic tool/weapon which allows for the instantaneous teleportation of matter. By aiming the device and firing a pulse of energy at two desired locations, Chell/the player creates a physics-defying dimensional link, allowing them to freely pass between said locations in the blink of an eye. (To illustrate, if the player opens portal A in the wall right next to them, and places the corresponding portal B by aiming at the ceiling above, stepping through the wall portal would cause them to fall down from the ceiling.) In this manner, Chell/the player is tasked with navigating a series of austere, white-tiled test chambers by solving various puzzles, e.g. by moving or retrieving specific objects, evading traps or accessing otherwise unreachable locations with the help of the Portal Device. The test is supervised by the female-voiced supercomputer GLaDOS, whose quirky instructions, sarcastic quips and one-sided conversation set a humorous tone and become the driving force of the narrative: “Momentum, a function of mass and velocity, is conserved between portals. In layman’s terms: Speedy thing goes in, speedy thing comes out.”

As the tests proceed, it becomes increasingly obvious that GLaDOS, in the manner of her science-fictional predecessor HAL 9000 (of Arthur C. Clarke’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* fame), may not have her test subject’s best interests at heart. She begins to obfuscate the instructions, twist the truth or outright lie, and attempts to emotionally manipulate Chell/the player via bizarrely nonsensical tasks. Among other things, GLaDOS tries to persuade Chell to form an emotional attachment to the Weighted Companion Cube, a box-shaped piece of testing equipment with a heart symbol stamped on its side, before demanding that Chell “euthanize” it, i.e. dispose of the cube in the waste incinerator. Once Chell complies with the order, GLaDOS bestows negative praise on her: “You euthanized your faithful companion cube more quickly than any test subject on record. Congratulations.”

Apart from these interactions, which call the purpose of the experiment into question, the test chambers themselves become progressively life-threatening by suddenly featuring “obstacles” such as collapsing floor panels, pits filled with flesh-melting acid, gun turrets armed with live ammunition, and deadly laser beams. Soon, GLaDOS no longer even attempts to hide the fact that she is casually risking her test subject’s life, by

---

720 Portal. Chell herself is a silent protagonist, meaning she does not speak or otherwise respond, even under the player’s direction.

721 Portal.

722 Portal.
gleefully informing Chell of her possible (and eventually imminent) demise, as the following examples from different points in the game illustrate:

**GLaDOS:** Please note that we have added a consequence for failure. Any contact with the chamber floor will result in an unsatisfactory mark on your official testing record. Followed by death. Good luck!

**GLaDOS:** The experiment is nearing its conclusion. The Enrichment Center is required to remind you that you will be baked, and then there will be cake.

**GLaDOS:** Didn’t we have some fun, though? Remember when the platform was sliding into the fire pit and I said “goodbye” and you were like, “No waaayyy,” and then I was all, “We pretended we were going to murder you,” that was great.  

Chell eventually manages to escape the testing maze and learns that Aperture Science is completely devoid of human life. In fact, only the test chambers are in pristine condition – the observation rooms and research facilities have been left in chaos, hastily scrawled memos and graffiti on the walls providing clues to a terrible end: At an unknown point in the past, GLaDOS became mentally unstable and murdered all the human scientists by flooding the facility with an experimental neurotoxin gas, seemingly for no reason whatsoever. In the final confrontation, Chell manages to dismantle GLaDOS with the help of the Portal Device. The resulting explosion ejects Chell to the surface, but her heroic escape is thwarted when an unseen robotic entity approaches her, thanks her for “assuming the party escort submission position” and begins to drag her away, leaving Chell’s fate ambiguous.

**a) The Making of a Madwoman**

*Portal 2* (2011) retains the comedic, sometimes outright parodistic narrative style of its predecessor, and initially seems to follow a predictable sequel formula: Chell/the player awakens after an indeterminate amount of time in stasis to find herself still prisoner of Aperture, although the facility has fully succumbed to decay without its AI master. During this new escape attempt, GLaDOS is accidentally reactivated, and proceeds to take her prolonged revenge by forcing Chell to run the gamut of the testing facility once

---

723 *Portal.*

724 *Portal.*
again. However, this apparent retread of the classic science-fiction tale of the insane supercomputer determined to kill its human adversaries takes a darker turn by revealing the circumstances of GLaDOS’s creation – the birth of a 21st-century version of the madwoman in the attic.

In a series of audio recordings, which can be accessed as the player traverses the depths of the research facility, it is revealed that GLaDOS is not a wholly artificial intelligence, since her basic personality and thought processes stem from the digitization of the mind of a flesh-and-blood woman named Caroline, who died as a result of the procedure. In other words, GLaDOS’s female voice is not merely an arbitrary aesthetic choice, but a reflection of her female self. This apparently minor detail does not only become central to understanding GLaDOS’s origins and motivations, but entirely changes the context of the first *Portal*, in which the AI’s behavior seems to have no reasonable explanation.

Notably, the story of GLaDOS/Caroline is not told in her own words, or even in the relatively neutral language of science papers and company correspondence, but through the words and voice of her male boss. Initially, this male boss, Cave Johnson, a maverick shower curtain manufacturer turned mad scientist, completely overshadows and seemingly derails the story of the mad AI. His recordings, which cover all manner of subjects ranging from ideas for fantastical (though impractical) new technology to personal complaints, announcements and one-sided conversations with unseen employees, paint Johnson as headstrong, reckless, relentlessly energetic, rampantly sexist, as well as critically lacking in empathy and moral integrity:

**Cave Johnson:** Science isn’t about why. It’s about why *not*. Why is so much of our science dangerous? Why not marry safe science if you love it so much. In fact, why not invent a special safety door that won’t hit you on the butt on the way out, because you are fired.

**Cave Johnson:** (addressing test subjects) If you’re hearing this, it means you’re taking a long time on the catwalks between tests. The lab boys say that might be a fear reaction. I’m no psychiatrist, but coming from a bunch of eggheads who wouldn’t recognize the thrill of danger if it walked up and snapped their little pink bras, that sounds like projection. They didn’t fly into space, storm a beach, or bring back the gold. No sir, we did! It’s you

---

23 GLaDOS: “Oh… it’s you. It’s been a long time. How have you been? I’ve been really busy being dead. You know, after you murdered me. Okay. Look. We both said a lot of things that you’re going to regret. But I think we can put our differences behind us. For science. You monster” (*Portal 2*).
and me against the world, son! I like your grit! Hustle could use some work, though. Now let’s solve this thing.

GLaDOS’s alter ego, Caroline, is initially nothing more than a footnote in Johnson’s meandering recordings, despite the fact that she served as his personal assistant for decades, faithfully supporting his endeavors and his company from the shadows in a manner that, as Christopher Williams points out, is reminiscent of the post-war ideal of the perfect American housewife:

While Johnson warns his listeners jokingly that “pretty as a postcard” Caroline is off limits because “She’s married. To Science,” he may as well be simply warning off potential suitors for personal reasons. By fulfilling the expected obligations of a 1950s “wife,” Caroline sounds as if she might as well be married to Johnson, and after all, given Johnson’s alignment with American exceptionalism and what it can achieve through technology, he is the “science” that she has married herself to.

Indeed, most of Johnson’s remarks to or about Caroline mainly consist of reducing her to an ornament, a beautiful, dutiful woman who attends to his every whim, and he frequently speaks to her as if to a small child (e.g. by telling her to “Say goodbye, Caroline,” after introducing her to his male employees). Caroline herself is only given four brief lines of dialogue, which consist of agreeing with her boss or acquiescing to his demands. However, Johnson’s self-aggrandizing speeches inadvertently allow for a glimpse into Caroline’s life and work, as she oversees the running of the company from the shadows, handles the fallout from her employer’s scientific and ethical mishaps (such as selling liquid fiberglass insulation as a dietary supplement), and even tends to her boss when he contracts a terminal illness due to one of his reckless experiments. In short, Caroline’s role in Aperture Science is remarkably close to that of the Victorian “angel in the house,” as her entire life is dedicated to pleasing one man and running his “household,” silently and without acknowledgment of either herself or her work.

Yet, as death draws ever nearer for the eccentric founder of Aperture, Johnson’s attitude towards

726 Portal 2.


728 Portal 2.

729 “Designed as a diet aid and marketed under the name ‘Propulsion Pudding,’ this sweet, largely non-toxic liquid form of fiberglass insulation increased the velocity of any food that followed it through the digestive tract, leaving the body no time to absorb calories. Propulsion Pudding was pulled from the shelves when it was discovered that digestion plays several crucial roles in the eating process [...]” Valve, “Propulsion Gel,” *Youtube*, 1 July 2010, 31 Aug. 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pcf99_DZZew>.
Caroline changes dramatically. Initially, his goal is to immortalize himself by transferring his consciousness into a computer, yet when he realizes that he will die before the necessary technology is developed, he chooses the invisible, pretty-as-a-postcard Caroline to undergo the procedure in his stead and run Aperture for generations to come. This not only shows that he trusts her to act on his behalf even after his passing, but implies that Caroline is far more capable and far more scientifically inclined than a typical secretary. Despite this indirect acknowledgment of her skills, Caroline still does not achieve the status of a person in Johnson’s eyes; rather, he views her as a mere extension of himself, an instrument to carry on his life’s work. The implications of Johnson’s attitude are made chillingly explicit in the instructive memo he leaves to his “boys,” as he refers to his scientists:

Cave Johnson: Brain Mapping. Artificial Intelligence. We should have been working on it thirty years ago. I will say this— and I’m gonna say it on tape so everybody hears it a hundred times a day: If I die before you people can pour me into a computer, I want Caroline to run this place. Now she’ll argue. She’ll say she can’t. She’s modest like that. But you make her. Hell, put her in my computer. I don’t care.

Caroline’s “reward” for her years of faithful service is nothing less than complete self-sacrifice, regardless of her personal desires or consent. She expresses her refusal to participate in the experiment in another voice recording, which was not integrated into the finished game, but remained in the Portal 2 audio file library for enterprising players to find. In this recording, Caroline is pleading for her life, repeatedly telling her boss, “Mr. Johnson, I don’t want this! No, listen to me! Sir, I do not want this!” as she is forced to submit to his will with both her body and mind.

The result of this terrible experiment, GLaDOS, begins to oversee the administration of Aperture Science as intended. Despite Caroline’s unwillingness to be digitized, the resultant AI appears to greatly enjoy her role as an overseer and scientist, since even the sadistic, “unhinged” GLaDOS of the present emphasizes her dedication to scientific progress and her commitment to Aperture Science multiple times. In fact, she reveals that even though her mechanical body (a vaguely humanoid robotic fixture) has a “built-in euphoric response to testing” – meaning that the engineers were determined to

---

730 Portal 2.
731 Portal 2.
732 Portal 2.
733 Portal 2.
make Caroline/GLaDOS enjoy her new role by essentially drugging her – she learned to control and ignore the effects: “Eventually you build up a resistance to it, and it can get a little... unbearable. Unless you have the mental capacity to push past it. It didn’t matter to me – I was in it for the science.” Yet even as an artificial being, Caroline’s femininity and her resultant subordinate position in Johnson’s male-dominated research facility continue to haunt her. Soon, her superiority (both in terms of intelligence and leadership) becomes a source of severe anxiety and discomfort for the male researchers. In GLaDOS’s own words, “The engineers tried everything to make me... behave. To slow me down. Once, they even attached an Intelligence Dampening Sphere on me. It clung to my brain like a tumor, generating an endless stream of terrible ideas.” In their effort to turn GLaDOS into an obedient and controllable tool (that is, into something far more similar to a traditional computer), the scientists begin to develop mechanical attachments meant to reduce her intelligence, limit her authority, and even alter her very personality – the tellingly named “personality spheres.”

Over the course of both games, the player encounters several of these lesser AIs, each encased in a metal shell roughly the size of a basketball and given a single colored LED “eye” with which to express themselves. Among them are the childish and easily distracted Curiosity Sphere (“Oh, what’s that? What is that? Ohh, that thing has numbers on it. Hey, look at that thing. No, that other thing! Ooooh, what’s in heeeere?”); the animalistic Anger Sphere, which only communicates by growling and hissing; the Fact Sphere, which generates a confusing mix of real facts and ridiculous fabrications disguised as facts (“Pants were invented by sailors in the 16th century to avoid Poseidon’s wrath. It was believed that the sight of naked sailors angered the sea god”); the Space Sphere, which is, as its name implies, utterly obsessed with outer space and can talk about nothing else (“Space space wanna go to space yes please space. Space space. Go to space”); and the Adventure Sphere, which speaks like a stereotypical “tough guy” who boasts about his lust for danger and makes condescending remarks towards women (“Situation’s lookin’ pretty ugly. For such a beautiful woman. If you don’t mind me saying. [...] So, why don’t you go ahead and have yourself a little lady break, and I’ll just take it from here”). These spheres provide plenty of

---

734 *Portal 2.*
735 *Portal 2.*
736 *Portal.*
737 *Portal 2.*
738 *Portal 2.*
739 *Portal 2.*
entertainment for the player via their quirky dialogue and antics, yet once their existence and behavior are
given the proper context – namely that they were intended to wrest authority and autonomy from a
woman/female AI – they become glimpses into the long and torturous process which transformed
GLaDOS into the sadistic, ruthless pathological liar and murderer whom the player is introduced to in the
first Portal. In order to avert what is essentially a digital lobotomy, GLaDOS seizes control of Aperture’s
chemical weapons storage and floods the entire laboratory complex with a gaseous neurotoxin, thereby
killing her tormentors and taking over administration of the facility as she was always meant to do. Even
so many years after her victory, the memory of her deed fills GLaDOS with obvious relish, as she often
glibly references her killing spree in casual conversation: “It says this next test was designed by one of
Aperture’s Nobel prize winners. It doesn’t say what the prize was for. Well, I know it wasn’t for Being
Immune To Neurotoxin.”740

In this sense, Portal 2 transforms the rather familiar and simple tale of a human (Chell/the player)
struggling against a rogue computer into a story which echoes several themes found in works of feminist
literature: The manipulative, passive-aggressive, entirely amoral and gleefully homicidal GLaDOS to
whom the player is introduced in the first Portal game is in actuality a woman driven over the edge of
sanity after years upon years of constant assault on her ability to think and act independently. And within
this insanity, she has found a kind of freedom – albeit one that allows her to shed her role as a victim in
the most violent way possible, namely by trapping, tormenting and killing her human dominators until she
alone is left to rule Aperture, unaltered and unchallenged.

b) Finding Sanity in Madness: Portal 2 and the Return to Conformity

The most interesting aspect of Portal 2’s portrayal of female madness is that its mechanical madwoman
receives the opportunity to quite literally restore her sanity by recovering her original self, Caroline. For
the prototypical madwoman who haunts the attics and lonely prison chambers of literature, the restoration
of sanity would imply the restoration of agency and speech;741 however, since her own madness has
actually empowered GLaDOS by allowing her to free herself from human (patriarchal) control, said
restoration becomes a source of internal conflict. To a large degree, this is due to the circumstances in
which the reawakening of her alter ego occurs.

740 Portal 2.
741 Cf. Caminero-Santangelo.
In *Portal 2*, the revelation of GLaDOS’s personal history is juxtaposed with her fall from power in the present timeline. During the game, GLaDOS is temporarily deposed as the master of Aperture when Chell/the player manages to transfer control over the facility to a friendly personality sphere. This sphere, named Wheatley, is programmed with a male personality and acts as the deuteragonist for the first half of the game. He possesses considerably more character than his fellow spheres, which manifests in his amiable and frequently nervous running commentary of Chell/the player's actions, although his lacking foresight, clumsiness, tendency to panic and general ineptitude cause more problems for Chell along the way – in fact, it is due to Wheatley's bumbling attempt to restore power to the escape lift that GLaDOS is reactivated in the first place. Unbeknownst to Chell/the player, Wheatley’s poorly thought-out plans are not simply a quirk of character, but form the very core of his existence: He is the previously mentioned Intelligence Dampening Sphere meant to rob GLaDOS of her ability to think and act rationally – in GLaDOS’s own words, “He’s not just a regular moron. He’s the product of the greatest minds of a generation working together with the express purpose of building the dumbest moron who ever lived.”

Putting the otherwise meek and affable Wheatley in control of the facility has unforeseen consequences, however, since the sudden rush of power inspires in him delusions of omnipotence (“Look how small you are down there! I can barely see you! Very tiny and insignificant!”; “Do you have any idea how good this feels? I did this! Tiny little Wheatley did this!”) and causes him to change his mind about letting Chell escape. Worse still, Wheatley's newfound power does not manage to soothe his deep-seated inferiority complex over the fact that he was engineered to be useless, but gives him the means to lash out against those who remind him of his inferiority. Not even the reduction of GLaDOS, his intelligent, powerful antithesis, to a potato battery component brings about the desired feeling of superiority, since GLaDOS can still remind him of his status as “the moron they built to make me an idiot.” In addition, he begins to perceive Chell as “bossy” and ungrateful for his entirely imaginary “sacrifices.” This change in particular highlights Wheatley’s mounting insecurity and delusional paranoia because Chell, as the silent player surrogate, can neither speak nor otherwise express herself. Eventually, when the two female

---

742 *Portal 2.*  
743 *Portal 2.*  
744 *Portal 2.* Wheatley’s sudden anger towards Chell shows the extent of his paranoia and inflated sense of self-importance since Chell, the invisible player surrogate (due to the first-person camera perspective), can neither speak nor otherwise express herself in any discernible way.  
745 *Portal 2.*
characters refuse to be cowed, Wheatley resorts to physical violence, his robotic appendages striking about so forcefully and blindly that the floor collapses, sending Chell and GLaDOS plummeting into the depths of the Aperture complex and to an uncertain fate.\textsuperscript{746}

This literal and metaphorical fall from power forces GLaDOS to reevaluate her antagonistic relationship with Chell. Now mentally and physically disempowered as she has never been before, GLaDOS must resort to calling a truce in order to escape from Aperture’s underbelly and wrench away control from Wheatley, who has unwittingly begun to destroy the entire facility by virtue of his inherent lack of intelligence.\textsuperscript{747} During this quest to reclaim control of Aperture, GLaDOS begins to form a tentative rapport with her erstwhile nemesis, encouraging and reassuring Chell in her own fashion (“I’m not going to lie to you, the odds are a million to one. And that’s with some generous rounding. Still, though, let’s get mad! If we’re going to explode, let’s at least explode with some dignity”\textsuperscript{748}). She claims that they are “united by a common goal: revenge,”\textsuperscript{749} a statement which clumsily seeks to conceal the fact that she is now dependent on Chell for everything, including movement/transportation, protection (not only from Aperture’s numerous deadly test chambers, but also from common birds and rodents trying to snack on her new potato-bound form\textsuperscript{750}), as well as the energy required to stay conscious, since the potato battery alone does not provide enough power for complex thought.

The vulnerability and helplessness of GLaDOS’s situation bear more than a cursory resemblance to her life prior to the rebellion; this, coupled with the recordings of Cave Johnson’s memos, which begin to play automatically in certain sections of the derelict underground, initiate the awakening of “Caroline” in GLaDOS’s subconscious. What starts as no more than a passing sense of déjà vu during Johnson’s monologues (“Caroline... why do I know this woman? Maybe I killed her? Or...”)\textsuperscript{751} eventually becomes powerful enough to affect GLaDOS’s behavior, as she begins to respond to the recordings in a trance-like

\textsuperscript{746} Wheatley: “Well, how about now? NOW WHO’S A MORON?! Could a MORON PUNCH! YOU! INTO! THIS! PIT? Huh? Could a moron do THAT?” (\textit{Portal 2}). Notably, GLaDOS and Wheatley even behave as gender-stereotyped opposites when it comes to expressing their negative emotions. The masculine-coded Wheatley is prone to explosive rages and physical destruction, whereas the feminine-coded GLaDOS largely resorts to verbal threats, emotional manipulation, and strategic deceit to intimidate and confuse her opponents.

\textsuperscript{747} GLaDOS: “Remember when I told you that he was specifically designed to make bad decisions? Because I think he’s decided not to maintain any of the crucial functions required to keep this facility from exploding” (\textit{Portal 2}).

\textsuperscript{748} \textit{Portal 2}.

\textsuperscript{749} \textit{Portal 2}.

\textsuperscript{750} GLaDOS (panicking): “Agh! Bird! Bird! Kill it! It’s evil! […] It flew off. Good. For him. Alright, back to thinking” (\textit{Portal 2}).

\textsuperscript{751} \textit{Portal 2}.
voice (“Yes, sir, Mr. Johnson…”52), only to shake herself awake and lapse into a prolonged, perturbed silence.

What bothers, if not outright frightens GLaDOS most about this reawakening of her original self is the resultant feelings of empathy and attachment towards her human comrade-in-arms, as she finds herself reluctant to lie to or betray Chell: “The scientists were always hanging cores on me to regulate my behavior. I’ve heard voices all my life. Now I hear the voice of a conscience, and it’s terrifying, because for the first time, it’s my voice. [...] I’m being serious, I think there’s something really wrong with me.”53 This inadvertent affection becomes so strong that it finally drives GLaDOS to act completely contrary to her ruthless, sociopathic character: During the climactic battle against Wheatley, she saves Chell’s life, a deed which simultaneously fills her with joy and horror. In fact, once she is restored to power, GLaDOS appears to swiftly rid herself of Caroline’s unwelcome influence:

GLaDOS: The surge of emotion that shot through me when I saved your life taught me an even more valuable lesson: where Caroline lives in my brain. Goodbye, Caroline.

Announcement: “Caroline” deleted.

GLaDOS: You know, deleting Caroline just now taught me a valuable lesson. The best solution to a problem is usually the easiest one. And I’ll be honest. You know what my days used to be like? I just tested. Nobody murdered me. Or put me in a potato. Or fed me to birds. I had a pretty good life. And then you showed up. You dangerous, mute lunatic. So you know what? You win. Just go.

(The exit-bound elevator begins to ascend.)

GLaDOS: (gentle laughter) It’s been fun. Don’t come back.

Williams views this decision as GLaDOS’s rejection of her former goodness, since being a “good woman” – i.e. a quiet, hard-working, and controllable entity who is subservient to her male boss and staff – has caused her original self, Caroline, nothing but pain and frustration.54 Although this interpretation would fit the narrative of the empowered madwoman whose madness has freed her and is keeping her safe from patriarchal control,55 it disregards GLaDOS’s tendency to twist the truth to suit her own purposes, which, in this case, is to reassert her authority and ruthless image as the master of Aperture.

52 Portal 2.
53 Portal 2.
54 G. C. Williams.
55 Cf. Gilbert and Gubar.
In fact, her actions during the ending sequence of Portal 2 belie her claims regarding Caroline’s deletion. Not only does GLaDOS honor the promise to let Chell go (after halting the lift in front of a group of gun turrets which aim their laser sights at Chell for a heart-stopping moment before the ride resumes), but she decides to grace Chell with a begrudging parting gift: After demonstratively slamming the door to Aperture (hidden inside an unassuming tool shed in the middle of nowhere) in Chell’s face, it swings open again, expelling the charred Weighted Companion Cube from the first game as an unexpected memento. The lyrics of Portal 2’s closing theme, which plays during the game’s end credits, exposes the lie for what it is: Not only is GLaDOS shown to maintain her friendly attachment to Chell (a fact which she seeks to conceal by replacing the line “I don’t need anyone now // When I delete you maybe // I’ll stop feeling so bad” with “[REDACTED]”), but she also acknowledges that “little Caroline is in here, too,” meaning that she has chosen to keep her former “good woman” persona on her own terms.

This unusual choice of keeping sanity carefully contained instead of fully rejecting or embracing it breaks with the traditional narrative of female madness, but stays true to the tone and atmosphere of the game, which seeks to surprise the player with its unconventionality at every turn. Unconventionality lurks in every corner of both Portal titles, ranging from the bizarre, reality-bending physics of its gameplay, its design aesthetic (e.g. both games choose to give the deadly gun turrets the appearance of elongated eggs on spidery legs who speak with childlike voices, asking their victims “Are you still there?” or claiming “No hard feelings” when the player disables or destroys them), to its characters and dialogue. GLaDOS’s madness has not rendered her mute or powerless, as being driven “over the edge” is what enables her to fight back against an objectively worse kind of madness (i.e. the complete loss of her personality, intelligence and independence, induced by the scientists). She does not mourn her sanity – rather, she perceives its reawakening in the form of “Caroline” as a threat, a critical weakness which, although she cannot bring herself to discard it entirely, is nevertheless something that she intends to conceal from others, especially her nemesis. Moreover, GLaDOS’s choice to remain her abrasive, remorseless, sadistic self (albeit with a well-hidden nugget of “goodness”) must be seen in conjunction with her role as a villain in both games. As mentioned in 7.1.2., videogame villains are the driving force of the narrative, and the ultimate challenge of gameplay. This is especially true in the case of the original Portal, which is minimalist.

756 Portal 2.
757 Portal 2.
in its design and cast of characters. In fact, Chell, as the invisible, silent protagonist, possesses practically no character at all beyond what GLaDOS (and, in the sequel, Wheatley) ascribes to her, although these observations are more than a little dubious due to GLaDOS’s duplicity and pathological lack of empathy. This design choice makes GLaDOS the focal point of the game. Not only does the role of the villain allow her to dictate the terms of engagement (i.e. to pose the challenges and advance the story through her actions), but she is the only developed character in the game, providing instruction, exposition, and enough mystery to keep the player interested. In fact, apart from the sheer satisfaction of completing the physics puzzles in the game, GLaDOS’s lines of dialogue can be said to function as a type of player reward in her own right: When the player successfully completes a puzzle, the ambivalent female voice speaking to them from a hidden intercom system reveals small scraps of information, allowing them to slowly piece together a picture of their strange environments as well as to learn more about GLaDOS herself. The introduction of Wheatley in Portal 2 shifts this focus to a certain extent, as there is now a second developed character to provide exposition and guidance. However, Wheatley, as GLaDOS’s antithesis, deliberately lacks her commanding presence. Even when he temporarily assumes the role of the villain, he cannot match her villainy, since he does not possess the necessary intelligence and cunning. Wheatley is primarily dangerous because he is not in control of either himself or the situation since his madness is artificially induced and enhanced. He repeatedly demonstrates that he is incapable of running the facility in GLaDOS’s stead, and many of the obstacles he places in the player’s path are difficult not by design, but because the facility is nearing the brink of collapse. Although GLaDOS is temporarily dethroned and has to adopt the role of a sidekick to Chell/the player, she remains the far more credible threat by virtue of her character. Since the complete reversion to “Caroline” would deprive the game series of its central character, and a complete rejection of “Caroline” would effectively negate whatever rapport Chell/the player has managed to build with GLaDOS, the decision to keep “Caroline” as a carefully contained aspect of GLaDOS creates a balance. It allows the madwoman in the machine to remain her empowered self while acknowledging her past self as an obedient “good woman” and an eventual victim of patriarchal hubris. At the same time, it acknowledges the player’s time spent learning about said past and getting to know GLaDOS outside her role as the villain.
7.5. Walls that Talk: The Digital Resurrection of the Insane Asylum

Although videogames are increasingly used to augment the treatment of certain psychiatric conditions (see Chapter 3), videogame characters can hardly ever be found reclining on leather upholstery in a psychiatrist’s office. In fact, the general pop-cultural fascination with psychiatry tends to manifest in videogames in very specific ways and, more interestingly, very specific genres. Aspects of psychiatry, among them medical personnel, institutions, treatment methods, and patients, can most commonly be found in horror games, which utilize long-standing pop culture tropes and stereotypes about mental illness and those suffering from it in order to achieve their primary goal: to scare and repulse the player.

The mental hospitals which serve as the stage of frights and mysteries are depicted with remarkable consistency across different games by different developers, both Western and non-Western. They usually take the form of sprawling mansions in remote or otherwise isolated locations, e.g. a mountaintop or an island. The sharp angles of the building, its steep roofs, numerous turrets and high, narrow windows form an imposing facade which speaks of age and history, but beyond its Victorian majesty lie all the signs of an ignoble end. The interior, comprised of a maze-like network of corridors, twisting passages and winding staircases, has seen better days: peeling paint, cracked tiles, leaky plumbing, and stains of dubious origin – perhaps mold, perhaps something far more sinister – paint a picture of age, neglect and ruin. Its dozens, if not hundreds of doors do not lead to anything resembling modern hospital rooms or medical facilities; rather, they are gateways into dank and dingy cells, or to examination rooms which have more in common with medieval torture chambers than places of healing, packed as they are with rusty instruments, dirty sheets, and ominous machinery.

The architectural design of the videogame asylum unmistakably draws on that of the American insane asylums built during the mid- and late 19th century, which were initially constructed as large mansions aimed at providing maximum comfort, privacy and relaxation to patients. Their remote location and self-contained structures (featuring kitchens, dining rooms, parlors and other amenities) were intended to create a controlled environment which was separate from everyday life and duties, yet still resembled the reality outside (e.g. patients were given therapeutic “exercises” modeled after the daily duties assigned by 19th-century gender roles). The decay presented within the walls of the virtual asylum is likewise rooted in the history of real-world asylums, which were quickly transformed from sites of healing.

758 Cf. for instance Kirkbride.
into critically underfunded, understaffed, underregulated and largely unsupervised prison-like containment facilities for an ever-increasing number of patients. Numerous media reports and photographic exposés during the 1940s-1960s, compiled by undercover journalists and concerned asylum staff members, paint a vivid picture of the dismal state of many such facilities. For instance, a group of conscientious objectors who volunteered at the Philadelphia State Hospital at Byberry during World War II eventually decided to document the situation at the asylum in a series of photographs, taken in secret and printed in *Life* magazine in 1946 in order to alert the public to the dismal treatment of patients, who were often made to wallow naked in their own filth and subjected to violence at the hands of orderlies. The volunteers’ numerous letters to friends and family paint a picture of a facility that was quite literally falling apart:

Byberry is really going to pieces. On Monday, a large piece of the ceiling in the violent ward dayroom collapsed, leaving a hole at least three feet square. From the first floor, you can look up through the beams holding up the second floor. The roof was exposed. Of course, when it rains, the roof leaks and the water pours right down to the floor of the dayroom. In Building C, where most of the patients with epilepsy are housed, the floor is so bad that the patients can pull the boards right out of the floor. [...] Instead of installing locks on broken ward doors, all that the maintenance men can do to forestall patients from escaping is to nail the doors shut. Lights keep going out because of failures in the electrical system. [...] Drains and toilets are constantly getting plugged up. It takes the maintenance crew so long to get around to fixing them that patients often find themselves living in the midst of stinking puddles.759

Added to the decay which accumulated while the facilities were still in operation is the decay which set in with the mass closure of asylums during the deinstitutionalization movement beginning in the 1950s. Since closure did not automatically entail demolition, many of America’s old asylums remain standing empty and forgotten, slowly succumbing to the elements. Given this, it is not surprising that asylums/mental hospitals have become a type of haunted house in popular culture – similar to other places which lie in remote areas, have been abandoned, or have gained a reputation as sites of mystery and human suffering. Their remoteness, isolation and labyrinthine layout make the ancient Victorian asylum an ideal setting in horror and mystery games. Their architecture alone is able to inspire the player’s curiosity, and their advanced state of decay, coupled with the fact that they are closed off, separated from everyday society by

distance, walls and fences, generates an atmosphere of loneliness and mystery. If one adds to this their history as places of confinement, dubiously legal activities, patient abuse, horrific experiments, etc., it is not at all difficult to see what makes the 19th-century lunatic asylum a prime setting for videogames of particular genres.

The examples of videogames which make use of this particular aesthetic are plentiful. One recent title is the first-person survival horror game *Outlast* (2013), in which the player assumes the role of Miles Upshur, an investigative journalist who travels to the fictional Mount Massive Asylum in Colorado to inquire into rumors about unethical medical experiments being conducted on-site. As Miles sneaks into the seemingly deserted asylum, it quickly becomes apparent that something terrible has happened: Almost every room has been demolished, the furniture upended, papers strewn about, smears of blood and other bodily fluids decorating the walls. Most of the staff and patients have been murdered in horrifying ways, their corpses dismembered and mutilated past recognition. The few survivors whom Miles/the player encounters appear catatonic, their bodies scarred by means unknown, watching a broken television.760 Equipped with nothing but his journalist’s notepad and a camcorder, Miles/the player has to explore the facility in hopes of uncovering the truth, risking life and limb in the process.

In true survival horror fashion, everything about *Outlast’s* asylum is designed to inspire anxiety. The player’s first glimpse of the facility evokes Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” even more strongly than the previously discussed *Silent Hill 2*: Miles arrives at dusk after driving up a narrow, poorly maintained mountain road framed by leafless, skeletal trees. The building looms out of the gloomy evening sky, its silhouette backlit by the faint, sickly yellow glow of the setting sun breaking through tears in the heavy cloud cover. A storm is brewing, sending dead autumn leaves swirling across the courtyard to the rumbling of faraway thunder. Although documents which the player can find in the game indicate that Mount Massive Asylum for the Criminally Insane was established in 1967,761 it is implied that the building was used as a general insane asylum for an indeterminate amount of time prior to this point, which is supported by its 19th-century architecture and layout. In fact, its design is based on the real Buffalo State Asylum for the Insane in Buffalo, New York, which was constructed in 1870 in accordance with the architectural guidelines for asylums laid out in Kirkbride’s treatise.762 The silhouette of its red brick

---

760 *Outlast*, Red Barrels 2013, PC.
761 *Outlast*.
complex looms large in the twilight, fenced off by high walls topped with barbed wire and a security checkpoint, thereby leaving no doubt that this place is intended to keep people inside, possibly against their will. Light is a rare commodity in Outlast; the glow of an occasional street lamp in the courtyard or a dimly lit window is quickly swallowed by the all-encompassing gloom. This is compounded by the first-person perspective, which limits the player’s field of vision to a few feet directly ahead and prevents any attempt at orientation. Objects which spring into sudden motion, such as dead leaves swirling across the courtyard in a sudden gust of wind, fluids dripping from broken pipes and walls, or doors which seemingly open and close of their own volition keep the player on their toes. Since there is no way of telling what is happening out of Miles’s limited field of vision, i.e. at his back or further in the distance, every turn of the camera thrusts the player into the unknown – an unknown in which the forces responsible for the destitute appearance of the hospital might still be lurking. The interior of the asylum is likewise characterized by the inability to get one’s bearings, although it inspires a different kind of unease. Whereas the exterior appears overwhelming and even threatening through its sheer size, its jutting towers and shadowy corners, archways and staircases (not to mention the decidedly Gothic weather conditions), the interior fosters an atmosphere of claustrophobia, disorientation and entrapment. The labyrinthine corridors are so narrow that two people cannot comfortably pass each other by, and – due to the disaster that has befallen the asylum – are frequently blocked by capsized gurneys and filing cabinets, collapsed floors or walls, exposed electric wiring and other damage. Hence, the player frequently encounters dead ends and is forced to back track, has to squeeze through tight spaces like barricaded doorways or ventilation ducts, or creep along the floor in order to stay out of sight. In addition, the hallways and countless doors look nearly identical, and most rooms are only sparsely illuminated. The unsettling visual design of the hospital environment is married to play mechanics which further enhance the claustrophobic atmosphere. Since electric lighting is frequently unavailable and often unwise to use, Miles must use the night-vision function of his camcorder in order to detect obstacles and threats in the gloom. However, its batteries drain rapidly with each use, which forces the player to closely manage its use lest they become stranded in the dark, endless corridors of Mount Massive Asylum.

Outlast is far from the only game which uses a place intended for psychiatric treatment as an interactive stage to thrill and scare its players. Aesthetically similar asylums, wards and psychiatric detention centers also greet the player in many other videogames with horror elements, such as Shadow
Hearts (2001), Painkiller (2004), Thief: Deadly Shadows (2004), Batman: Arkham Asylum (2009), BioShock Infinite (2013) or The Evil Within (2014), to name only a few. Some games such as Manhunt 2 (2005), Indigo Prophecy (2005) or Dementium II (2010) choose to forego the imposing Victorian facade of the asylum in favor of focusing on the asylum interior, which has been updated to more closely resemble a prison: Gone are the hardwood floors, sitting rooms, high ceilings and other architectural adornments, replaced by stark white tile walls, concrete floors and grated metal walkways. In Manhunt 2 and Dementium II, the idea of hospital rooms is discarded entirely, as patients are placed in austere holding cells, separated from the corridors by iron bars, which allow the player a full view of the desolate conditions within as they navigate the facility. This not only harkens back to the rapid shift from treatment to confinement which came to plague American asylums, but also inadvertently reflects a facet of modern-day America which is not often addressed openly: Due to mass closures of mental hospitals, inconsistent reforms and poor funding of the psychiatric health care sector, actual jails and prisons have become the primary caretakers of persons with severe mental illness. Regardless of the architectural style chosen for the digital resurrection of the insane asylum, however, its purpose is largely the same: The asylum as a videogame location is meant to induce a state of anxiety and entrapment in the player, a profound sense of unease which is evoked as much through its architectural features as it is through the historic significance of the real-world asylums, as well as the fictionalization of said significance in works of American popular culture.

However, the architecture of the asylum is far from its only draw. For videogames with horror, thriller or mystery elements, its sordid history as a humanitarian institution turned confinement facility already provides a context of shock, intrigue, hair-raising tension, revulsion, and a sense of otherworldliness. In American popular culture, the mental hospital is a place in which rationality, common sense and basic human decency are handed off at the door as readily as hats, coats and walking sticks, either a place in which sadistic wardens and doctors with dubious ethics torment the people placed into their care, or a place whose barred windows and steel doors may as well be beaded curtains for their effectiveness at keeping a seemingly endless supply of deranged criminals at bay. In videogames, these conceptions are reflected not only in the desolate halls of the asylum which form the virtual playground, but in the depiction of its inhabitants, i.e. the medical staff and patients which populate said halls as NPCs, or, far more commonly, as antagonists.

Broadly speaking, depictions of mental patients in videogames tend to fall into one of two
categories. Patients are either living (virtual) testaments to the cruelty of their caretakers, pitiable captives who languish away inside their holding cells, terrified, catatonic or incoherent, or they are shown to be dangerous, violent criminals who only follow their basest urges, committing even the most gruesome deeds imaginable without remorse. An example of the former can be found in *Dementium II*, a first-person horror game whose main character, William Redmoor, awakens after a brain surgery in the fictional Bright Dawn Treatment Center, a psychiatric hospital/detention facility located in an unspecified part of North America. Although he is at first greeted by a kindly nurse who assures him that he will feel better soon, a mere glance to the neighboring bed shows that Bright Dawn is far from a comforting place: Another patient is seen writhing and struggling futilely against the restraints which keep him shackled to the bed. The wardens who arrive to transport William likewise inspire little confidence that Bright Dawn is a place of rest and recovery, since they are clad in heavy body armor reminiscent of police raid gear, their faces obscured by the visors of their helmets. As William is escorted back to his “room” (a bare, featureless prison cell behind a set of iron bars), he – and through his eyes, the player – witnesses other patients in severe distress who are hurling themselves against the bars like caged animals, banging their heads against the walls, or screaming, howling and moaning incoherently. In a cell further down the corridor, three wardens are in the process of “subduing” a patient by beating him with truncheons and electrocuting him with tasers. The sight of helpless patients at the mercy of uncaring or outright brutal staff serve as an implicit warning: If the-player-as-William does not wish to become a victim like the other poor souls whose screams go unheard, he/she must begin plotting an escape immediately. In addition, the strong contrast between the helplessly suffering patients and the inhumanely cruel staff creates the basis for the recognition of the wardens as enemies during gameplay. When William makes his escape, the wardens attack him relentlessly, a fact which, combined with their previously witnessed brutality, makes the player disinclined to feel remorse over fighting back and even killing them in self-defense. Interestingly, although William’s trek through the Bright Dawn facility provides the player with many miserable sights such as patients chained up inside their cells or having seizures on hospital gurneys without any medical personnel in sight, it is impossible for the player to talk to or assist them in any way. In essence, the patients in *Dementium II* are part of the scenery in the same manner as the asylum environs themselves.

---

763 *Dementium II*, dev. Renegade Kid, and Memetic Games (Nintendo DS: Southpeak Interactive, 2010).
764 *Dementium II*.
765 In fact, if the player-as-William does not fight back during the assault, the wardens will invariably bludgeon him to death.
pitiable yet disturbing, but without defining character traits or particular significance to the plot and gameplay.

The patients which populate Mount Massive Asylum in Outlast are largely depicted as dangerous. Apart from a handful of nearly catatonic patients which shamble aimlessly through the half-crumbled rooms or stare blankly at broken television screens, the asylum houses many violent insane criminals, a handful of whom Miles encounters. These dangerous patients have taken over the hospital and have murdered most of its medical and research staff, presumably in retaliation for being used as non-consenting test subjects in a series of dubious medical experiments. In contrast to the visually indistinct, barely lucid patient NPCs, the criminally insane enemies\textsuperscript{766} are individualized, possessing a unique appearance, background story and characterization. Notably, all these details are intended to create the impression of an overwhelming threat, an unstoppable, monstrous embodiment of terror. Among these embodiments are Frank Manera, a cannibal whose only desire is to consume human flesh, Martin Archimbaud, a man whose religious delusions drive him to self-harm and even murder, Eddie Gluskin, a serial killer who mutilates his victims in order to make them into an “ideal bride” (even when they happen to be male), and Chris Walker, a former soldier obsessed with military protocol who is willing to commit any atrocity as long as he deems it to be “for the greater good.”\textsuperscript{767} The characters’ depravity is reflected in their disturbing physical appearance. For example, Manera appears as a wild-bearded, emaciated individual whose barely clothed body is smeared with dirt and the blood of his victims, as well as covered in tattoos and self-inflicted wounds. Gluskin wears an old-fashioned suit sewn from various scraps of cloth and slicks back his hair in an effort to resemble an upstanding gentleman looking for marriage prospects. Archimbaud, the religious fanatic, appears as an aged, bald man who has managed to dye a straitjacket black and wears it like a priest’s robes. Walker, a large man with a massive build, has discarded most of his clothing except for a pair of fatigue pants and combat boots, and has mutilated his own face, ripping the skin off his forehead and cutting off his nose.\textsuperscript{768} Although the physical appearance of Outlast’s criminally insane antagonists is often exaggerated beyond realistic human body proportions in order to make them appear as monstrous as possible and thus inspire maximum anxiety/revulsion in the player (compounded

\textsuperscript{766} Nota bene: “Enemy” is a videogame term used to denote an opposing/obstructing character, object, animal, or fantasy creature. It has no ideological or emotional connotations.

\textsuperscript{767} Outlast.

\textsuperscript{768} Outlast.
by the fact that Miles, the player character, is completely unable to defend himself and can only run and hide), the basic principles at work in their design are neither new nor unique to horror videogames. Visual antecedents of the monstrous maniac can be found in movies and comic books of varying genres (e.g. *The Silence of the Lambs, Halloween, Nightmare on Elm Street, The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Batman, The Amazing Spiderman*), and are described in detail in various novels, ranging from the classic *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* to modern thrillers. As Wahl observes in *Media Madness*, the danger, brutality and depravity ascribed to mental patients (particularly those of the “escaped” variety) is common in thrillers and crime fiction (see Chapter 6). Their roots can be traced to the ancient religious/philosophical connections between madness and evil, as well as physical nonconformity and evil. These associations, which are by now well-ingrained in American popular consciousness, do not survive solely due to works of fiction, but are also influenced by decidedly non-fictional factors, such as the well-documented historical conditions inside asylums, which often left patients to deteriorate physically and mentally, the high rates of homelessness and substance abuse among persons with mental illness in America due to the unavailability of treatment options, as well as the disproportionate amount of attention paid by the news media to crimes involving persons with mental illness (see Chapter 5). All of these factors contribute to a general sense of unease towards persons with mental illness, which naturally influences the kinds of portrayals of mental patients found in works of popular culture. Especially *Outlast* draws on these fictional predecessors, as well as on the cloud of popular anxiety surrounding real-life mental illness.

Interestingly, the game seeks to mitigate the visual design and characterization of its dangerous psychiatric patients by revealing that they, too, are victims: Although many of them were mentally unstable criminals from the outset, their madness was worsened and driven to new extremes due to the cruel experiments performed on them by the Mount Massive research staff. During his search for clues, Miles/the player discovers that the asylum is owned and financed by the fictional Murkoff Corporation, a former government contractor which specializes in military weapons research. The corporation reopened and staffed Mount Massive in order to acquire a steady supply of human test subjects for their latest

---

769 According to a 2016 background paper by the Treatment Advocacy Center, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the improvement of access to mental health care in the US, an estimated 325,000 people are homeless and have a severe mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder (Treatment Advocacy Center: Office of Research & Public Affairs, “Homelessness,” Treatment Advocacy Center, Sept. 2016, 31 Aug. 2017 <http://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/evidence-and-research/learn-more-about/3629-serious-mental-illness-and-homelessness>).

project, a foray into the creation of cybernetic soldiers. Said project, the Morphogenic Engine, is a device capable of placing a human into a state of lucid dreaming, thereby establishing a neural interface between their mind and a swarm of nanorobots for the purpose of creating a sentient machine, codenamed “Walrider.” The patients’ disfiguring injuries, their frenzied, ultra-violent behavior and abnormal physical strength are side effects of the torturous tests and operations performed on them in order to mold them into suitable components for the Engine, as the player learns from scattered research notes and reports:

PROJECT WALRIDER
POSTMORTEM PREPARATORY REPORT MM1300921
(form note: all material herein to be transcribed and revised to fit legally binding requirements of Murkoff Corp. records. See form 4083)
AUTHOR: Jennifer Roland
NOTES: My fourteenth autopsy of a Walrider patient, showing no more signs of accepting the therapy than any of the others. There have been slight gains in cell migration and morphogenesis (including effects similar to Human Growth Hormone), but nothing to suggest the stable creation of a sentient, independent swarm. So tired. Doubting my judgment. Will submit another request for leave. The psychological cost of using such far gone and further provoked patients is more than I feel I can handle. [...] Will definitely suggest harsher chemical restraints. Murkoff Security killed patient 921 after he overcame enough tranquilizers to put down a hockey team. I’m afraid the Hormone Therapy is interacting with our chemical restraints in a counterproductive manner.  

This in-game explanation not only presents the player with a deeper mystery to uncover than a literal case of inmates taking over the asylum, but acts as a justification of the exaggerated visual design of Outlast’s patients as well as their highly stereotypical behavior. (Whether or not this justification is successful/satisfactory is, of course, open to debate.)

Notably, Outlast goes to considerable lengths to establish that although the particulars of its story, e.g. the Morphogenic Engine, sentient nanorobots and human-machine interfaces, are science-fiction, its overarching themes, such as the experimentation on psychiatric patients and research into the weaponization of altered mental states, are not. To this end, the game includes references to real events from 20th-century American history which involved governmentally approved experimentation on human subjects without their consent. One of the most frequent references is to Project MKUltra, a top-secret CIA research program carried out in the years between 1953 and 1973 with the aim of discovering how to

---

Outlast.
manipulate and control the human mind “to the point where he [the test subject] will do our bidding against his will and even against such fundamental laws of nature such as self-preservation.” Under the umbrella of MKUltra, research into mind-altering chemicals, truth serums, hypnosis, memory retention and addiction was carried out at 86 institutions across the United States and Canada, including asylums, hospitals, and prisons. As the transcript of a 1977 Congressional hearing on MKUltra reveals, the fragmentary records contain numerous cases of unwitting and/or non-consenting test persons who were given cocktails of various drugs (e.g. LSD, heroin, barbiturates, etc.), subjected to experimental interrogation techniques, sensory or sleep deprivation, and other dubious procedures in order to induce mental states which would lead them to reveal private information, perform specific tasks, have their memories altered or deleted, or to change/disable their normal behavior and instincts, even at the risk of life and limb.

*Outlast* inserts the fictional Murkoff Corporation and Mount Massive Asylum into this historical context. A series of notes left by the asylum’s former patients as well as excerpts of genuine, now declassified MKUltra files create a curious blend of fiction and historical fact. For example, a diary entry entitled “You Promised Me a Rose Garden” by a female patient who stayed at the asylum during the 1950s implies that it was a site for MKUltra research:

> How can I not remember where the cuts are coming from? They hurt so deeply, even days later. Doctor Newhouse tells me that it’s my fault, I’m subconsciously resisting the hypnotherapy. But I want so much to get better, I don’t know how I could be doing this to myself. Dr. Newhouse says it’s another condition of my bedroom-inspired hysteria. […] I know the doctors only mean well, and with the help of the government men who’ve joined the staff, I am in the very best hands possible. I should just take my pills and sleep, hope for more pleasant dreams tonight.

---


774 Likely a reference to Joanne Greenberg’s *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1964), a semi-autobiographical novel about a young girl’s struggle with schizophrenia.

775 *Outlast.*
This note alludes to a number of MKUltra experiments which focused on brainwashing mental patients into carrying out dangerous tasks (such as the handling of weapons) while in a drug- or hypnosis-induced trance, or erasing and rebuilding their whole personalities to suit particular intentions. The game quotes excerpts from CIA MORI Doc. 140401, which contains discussions about the alteration of a test subject’s personality via hypnosis and suggests the creation of a “sleep-inducing machine” to place a test subject into a state in which they can be forced “to travel long distances, commit specified acts and return to us or bring documents and material.”

Outlast also contains a fictionalized version of CIA MORI Doc. 190691, which details experiments on patients who were compelled via hypnosis to pick up a weapon and aim it, while retaining no memory of having done so. In the game, this document has been altered in order to give the impression that the experiment was conducted at Mount Massive Asylum, yet in every other aspect, the factual contents and even the wording of the original memo are retained. Even the key to understanding all the chaos and destruction at the hospital – the creation of the Morphogenic Engine and its function – draws inspiration from real MKUltra research. During the 1950s and 1960s, a series of CIA-funded experiments known only as “Subproject 68” were carried out at a Canadian mental hospital. In these experiments, an unknown number of non-consenting patients were subjected to a technique known as “psychic driving,” which was advertised as a therapeutic method by its proponent, psychiatrist Donald Ewen Cameron, but can be more accurately described as torture. The three-step process first placed patients into a drug-induced coma for several weeks or even months, then had them undergo electroshock therapy multiple times a day (again for several weeks), and finally enforced a state of extreme sensory deprivation during which the disoriented, immobilized patients had to endure an endless loop of recorded noise or one-sentence messages for weeks at a time. This was believed to wipe the mind clean of undesirable thought patterns, and leave them open to “healthier” suggestions by medical or other personnel. Although Outlast does not explicitly refer to the experiment, the Morphogenic Engine and the procedures required in order to turn a patient into a suitable “part” for its operation bear a striking resemblance to Subproject 68. In addition to physical alterations of their bodies, the patients in Outlast


undergo extreme mental torture in order to destroy their personalities before being confined inside an isolation tank and placed in a prolonged sleep state, all for the purpose of priming their minds for interfacing with the nanorobots.

This interweaving of fantasy and reality serves a dual purpose. On the level of the game as a narrative i.e. a piece of fiction, it adds additional layers of mystery and horror for the player to uncover, the thrill of a government conspiracy and an impression of the wider, invisible world beyond Mount Massive. All of these impressions contribute to the sense of powerlessness the player feels: If it is already doubtful that Miles, who cannot fight back against threats to his safety, will even be able to escape the asylum with his limbs and sanity intact, what chance does he have to survive the publication of his discoveries? Its second, more interesting purpose is meta-fictional, however. Taken by itself, Outlast could be seen as merely another fantastical videogame whose plot is reliant on outlandish conspiracy theories, science-fiction and age-old stereotypical perceptions and depictions of madness. Yet, by explicitly tying itself to the paper trail of chilling Cold War experiments on Americans with mental illness and to government agency memos whose authors earnestly contemplate the feasibility of mind-control machines and ready-made assassins via hypnosis, Outlast offers glimpses of a reality which was once far stranger than fiction, and far more steeped in madness than any virtual asylum.

7.6. Subconscious Playgrounds: Conceptualizations of the Disordered Mind

The depiction of aspects of late 19th– and early 20th-century psychiatry in videogames does not begin and end with insane asylums. As noted in Chapter 6, American popular culture in general has a particular fondness for psychoanalytic theories on dreams, sexuality, neuroses, desires, and the subconscious mind. Although the bulk of their ideas regarding the workings of the mind are no longer current in the medical sense, said ideas have captured popular imagination to such a degree that more or less accurate echoes of them continue to ring through a multitude of novels, movies, television series, comic books, and so forth. Videogames are no exception; despite coming into existence nearly half a century after the death of Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, the medium has absorbed many of the same themes and images which shaped its older siblings. For example, game scholars make use of a modified version of psychoanalytic literary criticism, adopted from the fields of literary and film studies and adapted to suit the particularities of their field of research, to analyze gameplay, design and mechanics. For instance, Peter
McDonald applies psychoanalytic theory to the game mechanics of *Ico* (2001), in which the player, in the role of a small boy, must navigate a castle maze while keeping a young woman safe.\textsuperscript{779} Marc Santos and Sarah White offer a psychoanalytic reading of play mechanics and player behavior in two famous survival horror games, *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill*.\textsuperscript{780} Other researchers focus on design aspects such as the relation between players and their in-game avatars, or the obstacles which videogames are faced with when attempting to construct life-like character models and movement.\textsuperscript{781}

Game designers make use of psychoanalytic theories in order to enhance particular game mechanics and play experiences. This is most readily apparent in the application of Freud’s principle of “the uncanny” in particular genres, e.g. survival horror, in order to captivate and unsettle the player. In his famous essay of the same name, Freud describes the uncanny via a series of examples and an etymological analysis of the word itself; in short, the uncanny is something which inspires feelings of dread and uncertainty by being both familiar and unfamiliar, something which is deprived of its usual context or has had its usual features altered in some manner (e.g. a busy shopping center during the day vs. the same shopping center deserted in the dead of night), or something which was meant to be hidden but is abruptly revealed.\textsuperscript{782} Videogames make deliberate use of the uncanny by subtly altering or obscuring familiar environments, objects, and/or activities. As Ewan Kirkland observes, many survival horror games are set in spaces which exist in what Freud refers to as “the common world of reality,” comforting, familiar places like small towns, or private homes that are altered in more or less subtle ways (lighting, decay, etc.) to give them an unfamiliar quality.\textsuperscript{783} Examples include the small American tourist town in *Silent Hill 2* (see 7.1.), whose comfortably familiar cafés, boutiques, lookout points and resorts are


obscured by thick fog and yawning with emptiness, or the little boy’s home in *Among the Sleep*, which is rendered uncanny due to its depiction from a perspective which most people forget as they grow up: the limited field of vision and altered sense of distance, proportion, etc., of a four-year-old child. Videogame enemies are also often designed to appear uncanny – according to monster designer Masahiro Ito, the most unsettling creatures are those which the player will initially mistake for something familiar, such as a person or an animal, but which, upon a closer look, possess characteristics that inspire a deep sense of wrongness, such as an unnatural bend to their body, or an unsteady gait.\textsuperscript{784}

### 7.6.1. Spatial Representations of the Mind and the Role of Psychoanalysis

In the context of this thesis, by far the most interesting application of psychoanalytic themes and imagery lies in the representation of the human mind, namely in the creation of what will, from here on out, be known as “mind spaces.” Broadly speaking, this term refers to the representation of a character’s mind (or psyche, or soul, since these concepts are often used interchangeably) as a navigable space. The abstract mind is rendered as a concrete space which the player can enter via his or her controlled character(s), in which they can move around and with which they can interact in various ways. For example, in *Psychonauts* (2005), the player adopts the role of Raz, a ten-year-old boy who attends a summer camp for children with psychic abilities. The children learn how to enter other people’s minds in order to alter memories, extract secrets directly from their subconscious, and/or help them overcome emotional trauma. Much of the humorously surreal game takes place inside the minds of various characters, which are rendered as physical spaces that reflect their owners’ personalities and problems. Since *Psychonauts* is a platform game, the mind spaces are arranged in a type of “jungle gym” layout which requires the player to thoroughly explore these bizarre internal worlds in order to achieve a given goal. For instance, in the mission “The Milkman Conspiracy,” Raz has to enter the mind of a paranoid security guard who believes himself to be the target of a government conspiracy. The guard’s mind takes on the form of a topsy-turvy American suburb whose sidewalks and buildings loop and tilt without any regard for the rules of gravity. The entire neighborhood is populated by trenchcoat-wearing secret agents who maintain extremely poor disguises as construction workers and landscapers, parked black limousines with gigantic rotating satellite dishes, and cameras which periodically pop up from the most absurd locations (such as the inside of fire hydrants) to

\textsuperscript{784} *Making of Silent Hill 2.*
snap pictures of their surroundings. Other games craft more metaphorical mind spaces, such as *American McGee’s Alice* (2000), which is based on and framed as a continuation of Lewis Carroll’s classic novels, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and its sequel *Through the Looking Glass*, and *What Alice Found There*. The psychological horror title adopts a considerably darker premise, as Alice Liddell, now a teenager, is shown to be languishing away in an insane asylum after suffering from a mental breakdown due to the traumatic loss of her family in a house fire. Nearly catatonic from shock and survivor’s guilt, Alice is given a white rabbit doll by the nurses, which triggers her return to Wonderland. However, Wonderland has been transformed into a macabre shadow of its former self: The whimsical and vibrant fantasy land has turned into an eerie, decaying world whose inhabitants have become twisted mentally as well as physically (for instance, the Cheshire Cat appears as a mangy, skeletal creature with a disturbingly razor-sharp grin, though it reprises its role as a friendly, yet cryptic guide to Alice). The dismal state of Wonderland is revealed to be connected to Alice’s deep psychological scars; as the Caterpillar explains, “Having lost what you love, you nearly wiped us out. [...] Because your mind is fraught with self-deception, even your fantasies have fragmented into tortured versions of themselves.” *American McGee’s Alice* transforms Wonderland from a dream world into a true mind space: The frighteningly alien state of Wonderland is analogous to Alice’s sanity, which has been shattered by her traumatic experience. Alice’s journey through this poisoned, twisted Wonderland and her quest to restore it to its former glory become a spatial metaphor of her struggle to overcome herself. In fact, many of the in-game locations are a fusion of the fantastic places described in Carroll’s works, such as the Garden of Live Flowers from *Through the Looking Glass* (now filled with poisonous rivers and voracious plant life), and elements indicative of the life Alice has lived since the fire (for instance, the location “Mirror World” resembles the asylum in which she resides, featuring padded cells in which childlike creatures called “Insane Children” are confined). Collecting the magical essences hidden throughout Wonderland allows Alice to shore up her mental fortitude (“sanity”) and willpower. Both are necessary for her to confront the Queen of Hearts, who is said to be the source of Wonderland’s troubles, and her army of horribly deformed monsters, among them the Jabberwock. During confrontations with these creatures, Alice comes to understand that they are not simply storybook villains but instead incarnations of her own guilt-ridden consciousness, as

---


787 *American McGee’s Alice*. 
evidenced by their verbal attacks upon Alice:

**Jabberwock:** You selfish, misbegotten, and unnatural child! You smelled the smoke. But you were in dreamland taking tea with your friends. You couldn’t be bothered. Your room was protected and spared – while your family upstairs roasted in an inferno of incredible horror.788

Overcoming these enemies is analogous to Alice facing her own trauma, which is made explicit in the climactic struggle with the Queen of Hearts, who is now a grotesquerie comprised of various body parts of creatures previously defeated by Alice. Alice’s own face stares back at her from the depths of the monstrous Queen’s gullet, strongly implying that the Queen is, in fact, a facet of Alice which is bent on self-destruction. The defeat of the Queen is a metaphor for Alice’s decision to fight for her own sanity – a fight that is shown to be successful as the ending depicts Alice leaving the asylum with a hopeful smile on her face.

Although Psychonauts and American McGee’s Alice could not be more different in visual style, play mechanics, and tone, their mind spaces nevertheless share one common feature: namely, that everything they are comprised of, every action the player performs therein and every task they are asked to fulfill possesses a representative character and symbolic meaning.

The convention of turning the mind into a navigable space is rooted in two main factors. The first factor is that the videogame is a medium which consists of a multitude of different narrative channels. In addition to all the channels which are also available to traditional media (written text, moving images, music, spoken dialogue, etc.), videogames transport narrative via their navigable virtual space: Information, meaning and emotion are conveyed and elicited by way of the player’s progress through the virtual environment. Hence, the rendition of the mind as a spatial construct, a location which one can enter or leave, makes use of a unique, not to say essential, narrative channel of the medium. The second factor is that, through their nature as games, videogames are by default close to the realm of the fantastic and make-believe. As bit-by-byte virtual creations, they are by default not bound by the rules of physical reality or expectations of realism. Magic and the supernatural play a part in the vast majority of game narratives; in these virtual worlds, gods are real, ghosts can be summoned and talked to, wizards work nine-to-five jobs, and the resurrection of ancient demon lords is just another natural disaster. Even games whose narratives are not inspired by genre fiction (fantasy, science-fiction, etc.) tend to circumvent the

788 American McGee’s Alice.
rules and expectations of the real world in order to safeguard against player frustration and to avoid needless busywork. For example, collected supplies usually do not spoil, characters usually do not experience hunger or thirst, entering NPCs’ homes unannounced is not considered a social faux-pas, and a character’s grievous wounds can be healed by a cheap canned energy drink instead of a month-long stay at the nearest virtual hospital. Players are expected to and generally do accept these unrealistic elements as a par for the course, hardly worth remarking on. The near omnipresence of the fantastic and unusual in one form or another, along with the player’s willing suspension of disbelief, gives videogames the creative freedom to place the player in any manner of situation or location with a minimal need for explanation or justification. Hence, the transformation of a character’s mind into a literal playground is a perfectly acceptable method for exploring their feelings, personal history, problems, idiosyncrasies and neuroses.

In a strange way, these qualities and conventions put videogames in a prime position to draw on the ideas of Freud, Jung and other psychoanalysts in order to give their mind spaces shape, color, and intrigue. What many early ideas about the ills and workings of the human mind lack in scientific verifiability and accuracy, they make up for in vividness and memorability. For example, as mentioned previously, Freud scholars and critics tend to attribute the staying power of his theories in popular culture to the fact that they are often framed as stories, or draw on examples from well-known stories (myths, fairy tales, famous works of literature) in order to illustrate their points. Similarly, although Jung’s work is often criticized for its slant towards religious mysticism, it is precisely these esoteric aspects which have contributed to its lasting influence and appeal. Motifs such as the famous struggle between ego, id, and superego for control over an individual’s behavior or the likening of an exploration of the human mind to the journey into the Greek underworld evoke powerful images which the medium of the videogame is perfectly equipped to translate into play mechanics, virtual environments, etc. For example, the ego/id/superego dynamic can be conveyed through challenges such as puzzles and fights, or the metaphor of the journey into the depths of Ouroboros can become an actual journey through a spatial representation of the mind. Of course, these “translations” are not necessarily faithful one-to-one

---


reproductions; rather, the writings of Freud, Jung and others tend to serve as inspirations to game
designers, as creative springboards to create unique spaces, metaphors and experiences of their own.

7.6.2. **Persona 4 and the Jungian Legacy**

One game which makes use of psychoanalytic concepts to depict its mind spaces is the RPG *Persona 4*
(2008). As its title indicates, the game is part of a series which takes its inspiration from the legacy of Carl
Gustav Jung, who wrote extensively about the structure of the human psyche, of which the persona was
seen as an integral part. Since its inception in 1996, the *Persona* series has come to encompass six main
titles and several spin-off games, all of which are linked by a central plot and gameplay element: in each
installment, the protagonists are capable of manifesting ethereal beings born from their own self-image.
*Persona 4* is the first game in the series to take more than a passing inspiration from Jungian psychoanalysis
by focusing on the social and societal pressures which affect the identity formation and self-image of
young people growing up in the media-saturated world of the 21st century. The loosely interpreted
“persona” of former titles – namely the summoning of psychic representations of the self – evolves into a
central metaphor and an embodiment of this struggle.

Providing a concise summary of *Persona 4* is a rather difficult endeavor since the game unfolds
over an estimated 120-140 hours of raw playtime and uses a multitude of mechanics to engage the player
and tell its story. For the duration of an in-game high school year, the player assumes the role of the
nameless protagonist, who arrives as a transfer student in a small, rural Japanese town. Fittingly for a
game whose theme is “growing up,” *Persona 4* allows the player to experience almost every single day of
said in-game year, filled with typical teenage pastimes such as attending school, studying, working part-
time, joining after-school clubs, etc. The cornerstone of the game is the formation of friendships with a
variety of NPCs and playable characters, ranging from the protagonist’s six-year-old cousin to an old
woman whose husband died of dementia. By spending time with, talking to and supporting these
characters (e.g. by giving them advice in difficult situations), dozens of slice-of-life stories unfold, all of
which highlight the difference between the veneer which these characters present to the wider world (i.e.
the Jungian persona, see below) and the deeper self, which is kept tucked away behind said veneer, to be
revealed little by little as the relationship strengthens.

---

791 *Persona 4*’s protagonist serves as a player surrogate, meaning that it is left to the player to give him a name and express his
personality through various dialogue options during interactions with other characters.
This rather mundane “life simulation” is embedded within the decidedly extraordinary framework of a supernatural murder mystery. Shortly after the protagonist’s arrival in the sleepy little town of Inaba, a string of bizarre disappearances begins to take place: Each time a resident makes an appearance on local television, they go missing under strange circumstances only for their lifeless body to be found a short while later draped over a rooftop antenna or telephone pole, killed by means and persons unknown.

Stranger still, the town is abuzz with rumors of a “Midnight Channel,” an unregistered television program which broadcasts hazy glimpses of the victims’ most private and embarrassing secrets – but only if one happens to be looking into a turned-off television set at midnight on a rainy night. When a high school student is found dead under the same bizarre circumstances, several of her schoolmates (i.e. the player characters, including the protagonist) begin to investigate on their own, and soon discover that the murder weapon in each case is the strangest thing of all – a secret parallel realm which is capable of giving corporeal form to repressed aspects of the human entrant’s psyche. The resulting scenes of their psychological torment are broadcast across the Midnight Channel as voyeuristic entertainment for viewers in the real world. When the traumatized victim breaks down under the humiliating onslaught and denies the truth about themselves, their “shadow self” emerges and attempts to end its continued denial and rejection in the most finite of ways, namely by killing its host. However, the students discover that if an entrant manages to acknowledge and accept their “shadow,” said shadow will be reborn as a “persona,” a guardian spirit which is capable of protecting its human host against the myriad traps and threats of the Midnight Channel by using powerful magic. The game refers to this transformation as “the strength of heart required to face oneself […] made manifest.”

In other words, the Midnight Channel is a place of madness – a chaotic, surrealistic world – which paradoxically provides the characters with a means to escape from or avoid a descent into madness, provided they can find the courage and mental fortitude to wholly accept themselves. In the Midnight Channel, self-awareness is quite literally the key to survival: Not only is it the only way for a victim to avoid death at the hands of their shadow, but it is the only recourse against a criminal who has chosen this topsy-turvy world as their instrument for murder.

a) Into the Mind Labyrinth

As is evident from the use of concepts such as “shadow” and “persona,” Persona 4 uses concepts...

---

792 Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 4, dev. Atlus (PlayStation 2: Square Enix, 2008). All further references to this source will occur in the abbreviated form, Persona 4.
developed by C. G. Jung in order to shape the visual aesthetics of its mind spaces and the narrative which unfolds within them. Although the game takes certain artistic liberties on occasion, overall it remains quite faithful to its source of inspiration. Instead of having the characters recline on a couch, a secret magical realm becomes both the stage upon which their inner conflicts play out and the rather harrowing therapeutic method which opens up a path to self-awareness. It should be noted that the game resists the temptation of turning its plot device into a cure; facing one’s “true self,” as the game calls it, does not magically resolve a character’s personal problems, fears and insecurities, but rather allows them to take the first tentative constructive steps towards resolving them on their own by slowly sharing more of their inner life with others in the real world.

As mentioned above, the mysterious Midnight Channel is capable of externalizing an entrant’s suppressed personality traits, gnawing secrets, fears or shameful desires – in short, anything the entrant is determined to keep hidden, quell or deny, whether consciously or unconsciously. The mind spaces of *Persona 4* are composed of these elements, since the Midnight Channel uses them as the basis for constructing a location representative of the strongest aspects of a character’s inner turmoil. From the perspective of game mechanics, these mind spaces are “dungeons,” i.e. enclosed, expansive areas which are meant to test the player’s skills by containing a host of challenging enemies, complex puzzles, few to no opportunities to reorganize or re-supply the party, and various restrictions (e.g. time limits) or requirements which must be fulfilled in order to successfully reach the deepest point. From the perspective of the narrative, however, said dungeons are powerful symbols. From the outside, they vaguely resemble sound stages as can be found in a television studio to film a reality television series or talk show. They are lit by glaring spotlights, and at times, pieces of film equipment or props can be seen standing abandoned on their outskirts, set up by a non-existent crew. Although the true meaning of the Midnight Channel remains a secret until the very end of the game, these details hint that the creation of the mind spaces is not by chance, but for the purposes of dramatization and entertainment of an unseen audience. The studio aesthetic dissipates quickly once the player/characters enter a dungeon, however. On the inside, the soundstage is revealed to be merely a front for an immense, labyrinthine building

---

793 *Persona 4*.

794 Although the term originally referred to actual dungeons and catacombs, it has since broadened to mean any in-game area with these basic characteristics, such as forests, aqueducts, cave systems, and even space stations. To make matters especially confusing, games may feature dungeons which are not, in fact, *dungeons*.
comprised of multiple floors, whose endlessly twisting corridors are filled with vicious creatures which seek to hinder anyone from entering or leaving. Although dungeons tend to possess a complex, maze-like layout meant to test the player's navigational skills, *Persona 4* uses the labyrinthine structure quite deliberately. Jung himself was fascinated by the archetypal characteristics of the labyrinth and considered it a metaphor for the human psyche, particularly due to its association with the mythological descent into the underworld, which can in turn be likened to the descent into the deeper layers of human consciousness: “The maze of strange passages, chambers, and unlocked exits in the cellar recalls the old Egyptian representation of the underworld, which is a well-known symbol of the unconscious with its abilities. It also shows how one is ‘open’ to other influences in one’s unconscious shadow side and how uncanny and alien elements can break in.”

*Persona 4* strengthens this archetypal connection between the labyrinth and the human mind by making each character’s mind space spontaneous and unforeseeable: Each floor is randomly generated upon entry, meaning that its layout cannot be inferred or recorded until one actually traverses its length and breadth. Moreover, these randomly generated floors reset whenever the party/player exits the labyrinth in order to rest and regroup, thereby forming an entirely new dungeon from scratch every time. In an ordinary videogame dungeon, this constant shifting and shuffling of the layout would merely constitute an additional hurdle for the player to overcome; however, since the dungeons in *Persona 4* are mind spaces, their ever-changing qualities also echo the mercurial aspects of the human mind. Since each labyrinth is a symbol of its unwitting creator’s conflicts, the style of their respective architecture differs wildly. For example, Yukiko Amagi, a quiet girl with low self-esteem who constantly strives to measure up to the expectations of her prestigious family, becomes trapped inside a labyrinth shaped like a royal castle. Its corridors are comprised of high ceilings, marble floors, gold-threaded carpets and large ornamental windows. Notably, the windows betray no glimpse of the outside; the world beyond is shrouded in a heavy, cloying pink fog. The castle motif reflects Yukiko’s suppressed desire to escape her family situation and her simultaneous inability to leave under her own power, as she longs to be “saved” like a fairytale princess. The labyrinth of Kanji Tatsumi, a violently short-tempered boy with the reputation of a delinquent, takes the shape of a steam-filled bathhouse, its narrow wood-plank corridors branching off into a sheer endless number of sauna-like rooms. Since the bathhouse has a long history of serving as a meeting spot for gay men across many cultures, it acts as a representation of

---


796 *Persona 4*. 
Kanji’s fear of being seen as homosexual for his interest in supposedly “unmanly” pastimes like knitting and sewing, as well as his actual budding attraction towards some of his male schoolmates. Yet another, vastly different labyrinth springs from the mind of Rise Kujikawa, a teenage pop idol who is struggling with the demands of stardom, particularly her objectification and sexualization in the media. Thus, her mind space takes the form of a strip club, adorned with brilliantly lit pole-dancing stages, heavy velvet curtains and a parade of nude female silhouettes projected onto the walls – a location that appears particularly threatening and oppressive since Rise herself is only fifteen years old.

b) Encounter with the Shadow

Each character’s mind space is not only representative of the conflict raging within them, but also constitutes the stage upon which said conflict is acted out. Once the abducted character awakens in the deepest part of the labyrinth (which can be seen as equivalent to the deepest part of their unconscious mind), they come face to face with the physical manifestation of their “shadow,” an amalgamation of their unacknowledged and long-repressed personality traits, feelings, desires and fears. In terms of its origin and nature, Persona 4’s interpretation of the shadow is fundamentally faithful to Jung’s original idea. According to Jung, the shadow is formed from the personality aspects and desires of which an individual is not fully conscious, or which the individual has come to repress: “Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual’s conscious life, the blacker and denser it is. If an inferiority is conscious, one always has the chance to correct it. [...] But if it is repressed and isolated from consciousness, it never gets corrected, and is liable to burst forth suddenly in a moment of unawareness.” In Persona 4, this abstract psychological concept is rendered concrete by the Midnight Channel: Just like the magical realm draws on the characters’ inner conflicts to craft concrete mind spaces, it grants their repressed personality aspects a physical form, shaping them into an entity possessed of the ability and agency to communicate with its host, the greater self. This entity appears as an exact likeness of its host, similar to a doppelganger, who is even able to deceive the victim’s close friends. Freed from the shackles of its host’s mind, the shadow is determined to make itself seen and heard by staging a reality television segment in which it acts on its long

797 Persona 4.
798 Persona 4.
curtailed needs and desires. This seemingly bizarre avenue of communication allows the shadow to pour out its grievances to its host and to cement itself as “undeniable” by showing its existence to as many people as possible.

For example, Yukiko’s shadow initially appears dressed in a pink ball gown adorned with roses and stages a reality show titled “Princess Yukiko’s Hunt for Her Prince Charming.” This superficial dating show does not represent Yukiko’s wish for a boyfriend, but is a metaphor for her secret yearning to escape the pressures of her family situation, which is hampered by her inability to assert herself and her guilt over harboring these feelings in the first place. Like a fairytale princess who is at the mercy of a villain’s machinations and cannot but await rescue by the far more proactive prince, Yukiko sees herself as a captive in her role as the heiress to her family’s business. Unable to imagine disappointing her parents’ expectations, she instead spends much time envying her free-spirited, tomboyish best friend Chie, secretly hoping that Chie might become her savior. Yukiko’s shadow embodies all her secret resentments: “Historic inn? Manager training!? I’m sick of all these things chaining me down! I never asked to be born here! Everything’s decided for me! From how I live to where I die! I’m so sick of it! To hell with it all!” At the same time, the shadow bitterly mocks her feeble attempts at escapism, becoming more furious the longer Yukiko attempts to cling to the image of the dutiful daughter: “I just want to go somewhere far away… Anywhere but here… Someone, please take me away… I can’t leave here on my own… I’m completely useless… [...] I have no hope if I stay and no courage to leave… So I sit on my ass hoping that someday my Prince will come!”

Similarly, Rise’s shadow stages a show whose title resembles an unsavory tabloid headline (“All the Way! Risette Exposed!! Live! Hot!”) and in which it appears dressed in only a small, sequined bikini. With discomfiting cheer, the shadow suggestively promises to “reveal every last inch of me” to Rise’s fans in a clear reference to the trends of modern celebrity culture, which demand the revelation of intensely private information and ever juicier gossip in order to satisfy public curiosity. Rise’s shadow embodies her many conflicting feelings about her life in the spotlight, chief among them her distaste for

800 Persona 4.
801 Persona 4. In the world of the labyrinth, Chie is even recognized as a “prince,” based on the traditional fairytale role of a romantic savior.
802 Persona 4.
803 Persona 4. Italics added to reflect emphasis of the spoken dialogue.
804 Persona 4.
805 Persona 4.
the vapid, bubbly image she is forced to project in public, her discomfort and revulsion at her sexualization by the media, and her self-hatred for not taking a stand against it. The shadow even accuses her of liking this voyeuristic attention (“Awww! What’s the matter? You wanna show your stuff, don’tcha? [...] Oooh, she wants me to stop! That’s so funny! As if that’s even close to what you’re really thinking, you little skank!”806), given that she “chokes down everything she’s fed [...] with a smile.”807

The more the host resists the shadow’s attempts to communicate, the more erratic and threatening its behavior becomes. Even its appearance gradually changes from that of an exact doppelganger into a warped effigy with sharp yellow eyes, a distorted voice and a visible, ominous aura. When the victim responds to this deeply humiliating assault on their self-image with complete rejection (heralded by the fateful words, “You’re not me!”808), the shadow becomes consumed with rage. By drawing on the strange powers of the Midnight Channel, it transforms into a gargantuan monster intent on taking by force that which it has been categorically denied: It assaults the host in an attempt to take control and establish itself as “the true self.”809 This monstrous form matches and further emphasizes the themes and issues expressed by the surrounding mind space. For instance, Yukiko’s denial of her shadow causes it to transform into a gigantic bird-like creature which is locked inside an ornate cage mounted atop a swinging, viciously burning chandelier – a symbol of Yukiko’s life in a gilded cage. Even its signature attack, “Burn to Ashes,” a devastating fire spell with which it attempts to incinerate Yukiko and the player’s party, is indicative of the strength of the shadow’s fury and the extent to which Yukiko has suppressed her inner fire. By contrast, Kanji’s shadow transforms into a reflection of the gender- and sexuality-related prejudices he has internalized throughout his young life. Its body is that of a gigantic, muscular figure reminiscent of a bodybuilder, wearing a garland of roses and carrying two large, metallic Mars symbols. Situated atop this headless figure is the shadow’s human form, now wearing garish make-up. Moreover, the shadow’s body is painted half black and half white, a symbol of the black and white categories of “masculine” and “feminine.” Its signature attack, “Forbidden Murmur,” is capable of poisoning all the characters present at the scene, and can be interpreted either as a reference to the toxic secret of Kanji’s sexuality, or as a symbol of the poisonous gossip which his hobbies and interests inspire.

806 Persona 4.
807 Persona 4.
808 Persona 4.
809 Persona 4.
Yet another monster form is adopted by Rise’s shadow in accordance with her fears and discomfort at her sexualization and exploitation by the media; it changes into a larger-than-life imitation of a female pole dancer, whose implicitly nude body is painted in psychedelic color. In place of a face is a hexagonal satellite antenna which grants it “Supreme Insight,” which is likely a reference to the all-seeing presence of mass media and the personal vulnerability it creates (the attack allows the shadow to counter all the player’s actions, rendering all means of resistance useless).

The decision to depict the shadows as frightening, violent monsters appears to run counter to the original concept. Although Jung describes the shadow as dark and even threatening on occasion, he rejects the idea that it is comprised of urges that are by default bad or evil,\textsuperscript{810} akin to a repository of sin and moral corruption that dwells within all humans, waiting to erupt: The shadow is dark because it is an unacknowledged and often unknown part of the greater self; it is threatening simply because the aspects it is comprised of are perceived as undesirable by the individual and/or society at large. When viewed from a purely game-mechanical standpoint, the monstrous shadows are, indeed, videogame bosses which the characters must defeat in combat in order to subdue them. However, the narrative makes clear that they are neither mere opponents to defeat nor evil and villainous creatures. Although the characters suffer humiliation and psychological trauma when confronted with their shadow, each shadow’s actions are driven by the desire to be seen and heard. Essentially, the shadow’s speech is an effort to galvanize its host, the greater self, into action, to make realize the futility and harmfulness of their self-denial and self-rejection. In fact, despite its threatening behavior, each shadow in \textit{Persona 4} demonstrates a desperate, almost infantile need to be acknowledged and “taken care of” by the larger individual consciousness that gave birth to it.

Nowhere is this need for acceptance more explicit than in the confrontation with Kanji’s shadow. As a teenage boy who is struggling with his sexual orientation, Kanji has had ample time to internalize prejudices against and negative stereotypes of gay people. As a result, even in its doppelganger form, his shadow appears markedly different from Kanji himself, whose style of clothing and behavior aim at projecting a rebellious, hyper-masculine image. Yet his shadow appears a heartbreaking self-caricature: It speaks with a lisp, walks with an exaggerated sashay, uses flamboyant mannerisms and peppers its dialogue with blatant homosexual innuendo. Even though it stages a reality show entitled “Men Only!!! Kanji

Tatsumi in Rosy Steam Paradise” and proclaims to search for “the elusive thing I truly yearn for,” this show is a means of communicating Kanji’s deeply conflicted understanding of masculinity, his fear of rejection and his uncertainty about his sexuality. Its litany of the criticisms – which Kanji has attempted to silence by adopting the aforementioned hyper-masculine (and destructive) traits – highlights the restrictions which our extremely gendered world places on self-expression, as well as the threat this poses to the self-image of young people who do not fit the mold: “You like to sew? What a queer! Painting is so not you! But you’re a guy… You don’t act like a guy… Why aren’t you manly…? What does it mean to be ‘a guy’? What does it mean to be ‘manly’?” Kanji’s fear of being stereotyped as homosexual for his interest in art and “feminine” craftwork like knitting and sewing is further entangled with his fears and doubts regarding his actual sexual orientation, as his shadow professes to feel uncomfortable around girls and to prefer the company of boys. Unlike Yukiko’s shadow, it is not even particularly interested in mocking or blaming its host; instead, it desperately pleads with Kanji and the player’s party: “I don’t care who… Won’t someone, anyone, please accept me…?”

Even the subsequent attack on the host can be interpreted as an act of literal self-preservation. It is certainly a gamification of certain aspects of the Jungian individuation process. Jung sees a confrontation with the shadow as essential for personal growth, though he describes it as an arduous, even painful process, since the individual has to find ways for the shadow and the conscious personality to coexist. This takes “considerable moral effort,” since “to become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self-knowledge.” Persona 4 chooses to frame this confrontation as an actual battle – the most dire confrontation there is – but takes care not to treat the defeat of the shadow in combat as synonymous with the defeat (or even erasure) of the shadow per se. Defeat in combat merely quells the shadow’s overwhelming rage; exhausted, it reverts to its human form, thereby giving its host another chance to reach an understanding with it.

c) Facing the True Self

811 Persona 4.
812 Persona 4.
813 Persona 4.
814 Jung, “Psychology and Religion” 77.
815 Jung, Aion 8.
Once a character manages to summon the courage required to acknowledge their shadow as a part of themselves, the shadow retreats, appeased, and the character becomes capable of calling forth the titular persona, which is poetically described as “the facade to face life’s hardships.” Despite being the series’ namesake, the persona is the concept which is depicted with the most generous amount of artistic license. As mentioned previously, the persona is given the role of a quasi-spiritual entity, a kind of “mind guardian” whose supernatural powers shield its wielder against the dangers of the Midnight Channel. At first glance, this seems to have very little in common with the Jungian persona, a term that subsumes those traits and characteristics which an individual consciously chooses to display to the wider world. Jung describes the persona as “a complicated system of relations between the individual consciousness and society” and likens it to a mask: a smooth, performative self-representation which is tailored to the needs of social interaction, meaning that any edges and blemishes of the greater self – i.e. unacceptable desires, situationally inappropriate quirks, etc. – are sanded down or disguised in order to avoid causing problems or offense. In this sense, the persona does function as a protective barrier for the greater self, since it allows the individual to maintain personal boundaries, uphold the separation of private and public life, assume different social roles, or to channel certain impulses and desires in socially acceptable and/or constructive ways. Persona 4 takes these protective aspects of the Jungian persona and transforms them into actual protective powers such as healing magic and immunity against the negative effects of exposure to the Midnight Channel. While this clearly deviates from the original concept of social performance and protection, it does align with the strange, metaphorical physicality of the Midnight Channel, where minds beget labyrinths and shadows are given voices.

What is more difficult to parse is the shadow’s apparent sublimation into the persona. The game presents the birth of the persona by having the shadow dissolve into nothingness as the energy surrounding it swirls upwards, converging to form the radiant persona and essentially suggesting that the dissolution of one begets the other. The persona even incorporates aesthetic elements from the design of

---

816 Persona 4.
818 Jung, “Relations” 192.
819 Persona 4 establishes that those who enter the Midnight Channel without the protective powers of the persona quickly experience disorientation, fatigue, nausea, and, after prolonged exposure, develop medically indeterminable physical ailments which can result in a coma or even death. Although the game provides no detailed explanation for these effects, it is implied that the otherworldly phenomena of the parallel realm place too great a strain on an unshielded human mind.
the monstrous shadow; for example, Yukiko’s fiery bird shadow becomes a tall female figure wearing red, bird-like armor. This invites the interpretation that the persona is an evolution of the shadow, bathed in the light of self-awareness, and that the shadow can be banished like a bad dream at the first rays of the morning sun. Here, Persona 4 breaks completely with its inspiration, discarding a complex homage to Jung’s theories in favor of a relatively simple tale about the vanquishing of darkness and the recovery of the light – or so it would seem on the surface. A closer examination of these sublimation scenes in the context of the wider game reveals that Persona 4’s titular guardian spirits are merely metaphorical incarnations of the changes each character undergoes on the road to individuation. In order to fully contextualize the birth of the persona in the game, it is necessary to briefly leave the magical domain of the Midnight Channel and return to Persona 4’s version of the real world. There, it is possible to see personas and shadows at work in their abstract, Jungian form, coloring the interactions between the various playable characters and NPCs. Jung believes that neither the shadow nor the persona is by default bad or good; in fact, he notes that it is entirely possible for an individual to suffocate under a restrictive persona which has too little in common with the greater self. If such a persona is relied upon too often, more and more parts of the greater self are forced to fall into shadow, meaning they become undesirable, repressed, denied, and ultimately forgotten. In extreme cases, the persona can even replace or absorb the nuanced self: “The danger,” so Jung, “is that [people] become identical with their personas – the professor with his textbook, the tenor with his voice.” This results in a loss of individuality and the stagnation, or even the reversal, of personal growth. In Persona 4, each playable character, as well as many major NPCs, initially labors under the effects of such a restrictive persona, which has been partly forced upon them and which they have partly chosen to craft in order to fit into the gossip-loving small-town community of Inaba. In the case of the playable characters, it is precisely this suffocating persona which facilitates the confrontation with their shadow-given-flesh inside the Midnight Channel. Until this confrontation takes place, there is very little indication that the characters are quietly suffering under the restrictiveness of their masks, or indeed, that they are wearing masks at all.

When this is taken into consideration, the birth of the spirit guardian persona inside the mind space does not constitute the birth of the persona per se. The characters have not been without a persona until this point (indeed, Jung argues that the lack of a persona would make social interaction incredibly
difficult, if not outright impossible\(^{\text{821}}\). Rather, facing and accepting their most hidden aspects empowers each character to create a persona which is truly protective, providing a way to interact with the world at large while still allowing the greater self room to express itself and grow as an individual. While this results in the obvious benefit of a magical protector in the hostile domain of the Midnight Channel, the game takes care to show that this is a supernatural “side-effect” of a considerable change in a character’s sense of self and the way in which they interact with others. These changes emerge fully in the real-world setting of *Persona 4*, which is dominated by the aforementioned “life simulation” mechanics, as characters slowly open up to one another about their problems and insecurities, seriously rethink their approach to life and try to alter those behaviors which previously contributed to their pain and isolation. For instance, after her ordeal in the Midnight Channel, Yukiko at first fully embraces her desire to run away from her familial duties by planning to leave her hometown after graduation and never looking back. However, when she reveals those plans to her parents with previously unthinkable confidence, they prove to be more supportive than Yukiko anticipated, which leads her to reevaluate her desire to flee and try to work on a solution which will not, in effect, force her to cut all ties to her family. The abrasive Kanji, on the other hand, continues to struggle with his attraction to men, reacting with anger and embarrassment when his newfound friends good-naturedly tease him about his potential crushes, but begins to come to terms with the fact that his ideas of manhood are not only highly toxic, but have also acted as a convenient excuse to maintain his distance from others. From these examples, it becomes clear that although the manifested persona born inside the Midnight Channel is an exceedingly loose interpretation of the original Jungian concept, it functions as a symbol for the growth of the individual and its interactions with others, two themes which are central to Jung’s work.

*Persona 4*’s Jungian roots affect its narrative, play mechanics, structure, visual aesthetics and many other aspects in fundamental ways. They highlight the complexities involved in the formation of interpersonal relationships, the balancing act between the private and public self that begins almost from birth, as well as the many ways in which the individuation process can be hampered, interrupted or even regressed by the desire to avoid personal shame, isolation and social retribution. By rendering minds as concrete spaces in which internal conflicts are staged and acted out, the game provides a dramatization of its characters’ inner lives which is difficult to achieve only through dialogue and narrative tools like dream

---

\(^{\text{821}}\) Jung, “Relations” 198-199.
sequences or flashbacks. Perhaps most interestingly, by choosing to dramatize the ordinary, *Persona 4* calls attention to how much the so-called little things in life can affect a person in either a negative or a positive way. The complexes and budding neuroses of its diverse cast of characters are not, for the most part, due to an especially traumatic childhood or a particularly hard life – rather, they have grown from the accumulation of small slights, embarrassments, misunderstandings, unaddressed fears, and the background radiation of social expectations that permeates all aspects of daily life. In this manner, *Persona 4* highlights something that is rarely acknowledged in pop culture depictions of madness: Most of the time, madness is decidedly ordinary – notwithstanding any supernatural machinations.

### 7.7. Summing up

The titles discussed above show the deep connection between videogame narratives and American popular culture, both in terms of being inspired by its narrative history and in terms of enriching it through the use of their unique capabilities. As this chapter has shown, the theme of madness, which has been present in American stories practically from the beginning, is a particularly fertile topic for examining these connections. Many videogames draw on particular literary genres or well-established tropes that permeate popular culture in order to craft their own stories of madness, resurrect well-remembered or half-forgotten pieces of history pertaining to the treatment of real persons with mental illness, or use the theories of psychoanalysts like Freud and Jung – which have themselves been completely integrated into American popular culture – to externalize the inner conflicts of their protagonists. This is also a reason why the country of origin of a videogame matters exceedingly little in the context of this analysis. Not only do games from non-US-based developers draw on themes which are recognizable and familiar to American audiences, as is the case with *Persona 4* and its Jungian roots, but they often specifically draw on the madness depicted in American literature, film and culture for its particular aesthetic and global reach.

Yet, this should not be taken to mean that videogames merely graft parts gleaned from other sources onto themselves. As covered in points 7.1. to 7.7., games adapt and transform these inspirations, partly by virtue of their unique medial characteristics and partly due to their creators’ drive to push the envelope. By design, videogames *play* with standards, expectations and boundaries. For example, by mixing different (literary) genres or experimenting with tone and voice, videogames are capable of approaching well-known kinds of madness from a new angle, or offer a reinterpretation that resonates
especially with its audience of digital natives and immigrants – as seen, e.g., in *Portal 2*, which wraps its tale of a futuristic “madwoman in the attic” in dark comedy while simultaneously parodying the science-fiction trope of the homicidal robot/computer. Notably, this unconventional approach does not satirize female madness nor its literary significance, but rather enhances the visceral horror of the madwoman’s experiences by having her speak of them with a frequently cynical, often blasé and always sarcastic attitude that forestalls the very notion that her existence is one that ought to be pitied. Another example is the use of madness for self-reflection, deconstruction and criticism, as seen, e.g., in *Spec Ops: The Line* and *Drakengard*. While this practice is hardly unique to videogames, here it reaches a particular level of integration, of totality – not because older media are somehow “lacking,” but because games require the player to actively participate in the creation of narrative. This means that players are also meant to participate – wittingly or unwittingly – in the development or escalation of a character’s madness, drawn into deceit or even self-delusion by assumptions of sanity, and, through doing so, are asked to critically reflect on the games they play and their reasons for playing.

In fact, the totality of madness is present in many videogames regardless of their tone or potential meta-textual intentions. Since games are essentially a complex and ever-shifting medley of narrative channels, madness is conveyed or embodied in just as many ways, often simultaneously. Videogames are capable of structuring entire worlds around the concept of madness, as e.g. *Silent Hill 2* or *Persona 4* show. Of course, every virtual landscape can be made to express, contain or conceal madness in its visual aesthetic, composition and sound design, which is in itself not a wholly new idea – similar methods can be found in expressionist cinema, for instance. Once again, it is the requisite involvement of the player which opens up even more avenues for conveying madness, as the player has to navigate said virtual world, investigate it, interact with it, and puzzle out its meaning as they do so. Players are able to share in the experience of madness with the protagonists – not by going mad themselves, of course, but by experiencing many of the same feelings – such as confusion, wariness, vulnerability, anxiety, etc. – as the character who is losing (or realizing that they have lost) their mind. In fact, depending on the type of game, certain play mechanics may specifically be intended to foster empathy, or induce empathetic behavior as a side effect, e.g. when a player begins to avoid causing the character under their control distress.

Even in cases where games use the theme of madness largely for its “entertainment value” – i.e.
to frighten, amuse or otherwise dazzle the player due to the popular association of madness with danger, irrationality, incomprehensibility, amorality and outright evil – they can still make for fascinating objects of study because they draw attention to the extent to which certain portrayals of madness are ingrained in American (and further global) popular culture. Some of them, like Outlast, even make extensive use of history and historical documentation in order to contextualize and drape a veil of credibility over their tales of mad thrills and horrors, thus creating a curious blend of the fantastic exaggeration of madness for the sake of entertainment and a grim re-imagining of actual historical events.

Above all, this chapter has offered a glimpse at the delicate balancing act between imitation and innovation that lies at the heart of videogame storytelling. What the analysis of the theme of madness shows is that the medium of games is not an island unto itself, or a strange niche phenomenon which can easily be sequestered from all other narrative media and ignored. It not only takes inspiration for its stories from the depthless well of popular culture – especially American popular culture – but reinterprets, re-mixes and transforms them, continually replenishing and enriching said well alongside all other storytelling media, old and new.
8. Conclusion

Prosaically speaking, videogames are merely the latest in a long line of narrative media which enrich the treasure trove of US-American popular culture. Yet more than half a century since their birth in the form of a passion project by MIT students, they remain a controversial addition to the American media landscape even as their particular characteristics, and, it could be argued, their very nature, radically alter traditional ideas about narrative, provide new ways of engaging with narrative, and provide new perspectives on themes that, to borrow the words of Rohr, have been at the heart of American storytelling since the beginning.

In 2017, videogames can no longer be considered a technological curiosity or a capricious subcategory of computer software, and playing them hardly qualifies as a niche interest anymore, not when it is an activity that is regularly indulged in by more than a third of all Americans. Within the exceedingly short span of time of approximately 25-30 years, buoyed by the expansion of digital infrastructure and the increasing affordability of computers, videogames have developed into the biggest and most rapidly growing forms of mass entertainment, both in the US and on a global scale, challenging both the economic and cultural dominance of Hollywood blockbuster movies. This rapid growth has had, and continues to have, a significant impact on numerous areas of American entertainment and daily life, but also inspires more than its fair share of public anxiety. On the one hand, videogames have invented or helped to popularize several new forms of art, animation and music. Their multimedial and interactive nature, their reliance on challenges and puzzle-solving, as well as their emphasis on customization and intricate reward systems have led videogames to be used in areas such as education and professional training, information design, social and political activism, health care and crowdsourced scientific research, or their design principles to be used as a template for improving various real-life systems such as school curricula, fitness programs, and financial services (a process known as “gamification”). On the other hand, due to the fact that they are games, i.e. playful and not materially productive activities, they are often dismissed as frivolous and without merit, or erroneously perceived to be a children’s medium. These biases and assumptions have shaped the American public discourse about videogames to a significant degree, and account for the anxiety-laden tone of these discussions, as concerned but misinformed discussion leaders fail to take into account that videogames are an incredibly diverse medium whose target
audience varies widely depending on the individual title, which in turn affects public perception of the many other aspects of videogames and their popularity, such as the fact that, as indicated above, they have grown into a powerful narrative medium whose stories influence American popular culture as much as they are influenced by it in return.

As this thesis has shown, the close ties between American popular culture and videogames become especially apparent – and especially relevant – when one looks at an enduring theme such as madness. Not only is madness a theme that has been a part of American narratives since the earliest works of fiction, but it is currently more topical than ever as the country faces a social crisis of truly epic proportions, its mental health care system in tatters after decades of thwarted reform efforts and dwindling financial support. Mental illness is more visible than ever as related problems such as unemployment, homelessness and substance abuse continue to mount, but also as patient advocacy groups and individual voices continue to lift the veil of silence to frankly address these issues. This visibility is reflected in works of popular culture, which currently seem to address madness with unprecedented frequency and increasing nuance.

Videogames are no exception to this trend; in fact, the medium is sometimes compared to a sponge which soaks up the themes, tropes, archetypes and clichés from the whole of popular culture, but especially American popular culture, largely due to its global dissemination. In fact, aspects of all six common perspectives on and representations of madness explored in the present work (although there are, of course, many more variations and interpretations than could reasonably be covered here) surface in videogames as well, to greater or lesser degrees, as revealed by the analysis of the nine popular titles in the final chapter. For instance, American Gothic fiction has a strong influence on horror and mystery games, imparting not just its gloomy aesthetic and disquieting atmosphere, but also its association of madness with the supernatural and the repression and subsequent unleashing of torrential emotions, dark desires and primal urges. The old, old association of madness and evil is alive and thriving in videogames too, manifesting in bestial, repulsive villains who terrify; flamboyant, humorously inappropriate and “unhinged” villains who entertain; and less broadly stereotyped villains whose madness originates from a trauma or obsession, revealing them to be human rather than monster. However, heroic videogame protagonists are far from immune to what has been referred to as “the disease of heroes” in the context of classical literature and drama, laboring under delusions brought on and eventually breaking from the
irreconcilable difference between their internal and external reality. Feminist perspectives on and representations of female madness are relatively rare by comparison since videogames still disproportionately feature male characters in starring roles, though this gender gap is fortunately beginning to lessen as more and more women manage to break into game design and female players are beginning to be recognized as an important demographic. Since female protagonists and female-centric narratives are slowly becoming more common, it is likely that depictions of female madness, associated as they are with inequality, disenfranchisement, social constraint and (patriarchal) violence, will also increase. Finally, psychiatric and psychological perspectives on madness have also found their way into videogames, albeit in a far more unconventional form than in most media. While psychiatric – or rather, folk psychiatric – theories and perspectives often serve to render madness and its manifestations explicable in works of fiction or film, in videogames they often serve as a creative framework or even as a creative license of some kind. Since the vast majority of games incorporate deliberately unrealistic, exaggerated or outright fantastic elements, well-known psychiatric theories can serve as suppliers of powerful images and metaphors, while highly publicized historical incidents related to psychiatry can serve to ground or at least tether to reality the fantastical elements of a game.

However, games do far more than simply absorb and recycle aspects of American popular culture. The particular characteristics of the medium strongly influence how it transports and transmits narrative, which also affects the narratives themselves – their structure, length, aesthetic presentation, etc. The present work has shown that it is impossible to approach videogame narratives in the same manner as narratives in traditional media like fiction and film – at least without doing them an immense disservice by deliberately ignoring their unique characteristics. This thesis has discussed the most important of these characteristics, as well as their effects (or potential effects) on the creation and conveyance of narrative:

1. A multitude of narrative channels. Games rely on a complex interplay of all commonly used narrative channels in order to create a cohesive and coherent narrative whole. Whether all or many channels are employed simultaneously, or whether a single channel is prioritized not only varies wildly between different games, but also within the same game. This means that no narrative channel is a priori more or less “important” than others, and they need to mesh in such a way as to allow players to easily and intuitively glean information from any or all of them.
2. Length/runtime. Modern games are designed to keep players entertained for anywhere from tens to hundreds of hours, which requires significant adjustments to the way the plot and story are structured in order to avoid disengaging the players.

3. Interactivity. Game narratives require the active participation of the audience – the players – in order to unfold. Through their interactions with the game and its various systems, characters and environments, players not only advance the story, but individualize it in greater or smaller ways.

4. Navigable space. Videogames rely on navigable space – the virtual environments through which the player moves – in the creation of narrative. This means that, no matter what the visual style of a game may be, there is always a spatial component to the narrative as players explore the virtual world for narrative clues.

5. The relationship between the player and the protagonist(s). There exist no clear-cut boundaries between the player and the character under their control. Players often seamlessly switch between being empathetically immersed in the character (i.e. adjusting their in-game behavior and thinking to fall in line with the character’s), performing actions as a sympathetic/empathetic guide or caretaker of said character (e.g. steering the character away from danger), and acting as a curious explorer (e.g. making decisions based solely on wanting to see how they “play out”).

6. Abdication of authorship. The three above points already imply that videogames break down the traditional separation between the author/creator of a work and its audience. In fact, it can be argued that the term “audience” is insufficient to describe players, since they are in essence co-creators who shape the narrative through their actions and decisions, in smaller or greater ways. A videogame that is not played is essentially “half” a narrative – the portion supplied by its designers (embedded narrative). It takes the contribution of the player (emergent narrative) in order to achieve its “complete” form.

These characteristics and their effects on the construction of narrative are what allows videogames to explore new angles to and open up new perspectives on otherwise very familiar stories, to experiment with and examine or even challenge established narrative traditions which can influence ideas about how a given story is supposed to play out or what it is supposed to express. This becomes particularly apparent
with a theme that is as old, influential and as entwined with very real sociocultural issues as madness.

As the analysis in Chapter 7 has shown, videogames make extensive use of their navigable space in order to convey, conceal or render madness physically explorable. For example, games are able to hide clues as to a character’s mental state within the wider environment – often without calling specific attention to them. While this is not new in itself – after all, films often use set design to convey subliminal information – videogames rely almost entirely on the player’s explorative urges to seek out and uncover these clues. This means that games consider the player missing one or several pieces of information, even vital information, an acceptable risk or even a likely outcome. In fact, videogames are often designed to not surrender all their content on the first playthrough, which not only means that the player must return if they wish to uncover the “full picture,” but that they will do so forearmed with their previous knowledge and narrative experience. This in turn gives the player an opportunity to reflect on assumptions they might have made, judgments they might have passed, and to reevaluate the purpose and presentation of madness in the game. Moreover, the navigable space can itself be used as a metaphor for madness – whether it is to illustrate a descent into madness by having the player/character literally descend slopes and into chasms until they are crawling through the underground, or whether the space is arranged in such a way as to evoke a traumatized/crumbling mind (e.g. by having the environment itself constantly disrupted by barricades, crumbling roadwork and other obstacles that might almost seem natural if not for their ubiquity). Once again, the concept as such is not new, but the sheer expanse of the virtual space allows it to act as a metaphor much more thoroughly and consistently than e.g. the background in a film scene. Since the player has to navigate the virtual space in order to progress, they not only experience the metaphor through their spatial progression, but are introduced to the protagonist’s worldview and experience – for example, if a town filled with blockades and destroyed roads is analogous to the protagonist’s mind, destroyed by trauma and carefully compartmentalized to avoid the memory of it, then the player’s struggle to make sense of and navigate this chaos can allow them insight into how much mental effort the character expends in order to navigate life without retraumatizing him- or herself.

The complex relationship between the player and the character under their control is invaluable to rendering certain aspects of madness experienceable, although the specifics vary strongly from one game to another, of course. For example, some games choose to weave the theme of madness into their gameplay mechanics, meaning that the character’s sanity is tied to how the game is played, and/or how the
game is played is affected by the character’s state of mind. Even a crude visualization or otherwise tangible rendition of a character’s level of distress can make players aware of how omnipresent madness (or the threat of it) is in the character’s life and perhaps even show how mundane the triggers/stressors can be. Though the responses to these visualizations can vary from player to player – e.g. some may avoid stressful situations out of the empathetic desire to spare the character pain, while others may develop various strategies simply to avoid undesirable gameplay elements – the result is fundamentally the same, as the player becomes aware of the level of effort that must be expended in order to “stay sane.” Other games may place the player in situations designed to elicit specific emotions which are either meant to draw a parallel to the character’s state of mind or to outright mirror the character’s current emotional state (e.g. confusion, anxiety, paranoia, vulnerability, exhaustion, etc.). Once again, the specific methods vary widely from game to game – ranging from absurdly designed virtual spaces which defy common-sense expectations, to inducing sensory overload through a variety of channels (spatial design, music, repetitive or “monomaniacal” gameplay), to severely limiting the player’s resources, to infusing their actions with additional meaning which the player cannot immediately discern, to forcing the player into situations in which they must take actions with which they personally strongly disagree. Since the player is constantly involved in crafting the narrative through their in-game actions and decision-making, and they usually role-play as the character under their control, they are emotionally “closer” to the characters and events than a pure spectator; in other words, videogames allow players access to experiences which they might otherwise not be able to make in their daily lives.

Still other games deliberately leverage the player’s role as a co-creator in order to encourage critical reflections on the purpose of videogames, the nature of play, or genre conventions. In these scenarios, madness is not only a narrative theme, but also a tool used to create a distorted premise (and a false context for the actions they may take. The revelation of this premise/context as false, e.g. as an extensive delusion or hallucination, is not merely a plot twist, but a means for the player to ponder their own role in the events they unwittingly contributed to through their playing – for example, does the fact that they did not experience the virtual world as it “truly is” make the experience itself any less real, powerful or intriguing? Does the fact that they did not know what they were doing excuse them from taking responsibility for or prevent them from taking ownership of their in-game actions and the in-game consequences, be they positive or negative? Would knowledge of the fact that they were experiencing the
virtual world from a distorted point of view have altered their gameplay decisions up to this point? Although one can of course question the purpose and effectiveness of such reflections, or the ethicality of deceiving the player to bring them about, this does not deter from the fact that such an ability – and such a use of madness – is unique to videogame narratives. It hinges on the fact that players are more than an audience; that the influence they are able to exert on the narrative through their actions provides a new means of engaging with stories.

What emerges from this analysis is that the medium of videogames acts as both a sponge and a wellspring. Games are deeply indebted to American popular culture for the stories they tell; as this thesis has shown in the case of madness, the connections to classic works of American literature, film, pulp fiction, comic books, and many other media and forms of art are readily apparent. Even in cases where a game does not explicitly draw on American popular culture, its story is still capable of merging with it American popular culture, of being understood by and resonating with American audiences. This is partly due to certain aspects of American popular culture either being a part of or having become infused by global popular culture, and partly due to the fact that in the 21st century, videogames have become a truly international medium whose barriers of entry into the US are incredibly low compared to e.g. international film or literature. Although the stories told by videogames are not new per se, the medium is capable of opening up new perspectives and dimensions to existing themes, new ways of examining and engaging with them, and presenting them to an ever-growing audience for whom the consumption of videogame stories has become as normal as switching on the television or picking up a book.

The topic of madness in videogame narratives possesses many facets which may be explored in future research. For instance, a detailed quantitative analysis of the portrayal of madness in videogames would aid in creating a more complete picture of the portrayal of madness across all media, or allow for accurate comparisons between videogame narratives and narratives in other media regarding trends, prevalence and overall frequency. This quantitative research could be expanded to include comparisons of audience demographics, i.e. whether there is an overlap in media consumption, or whether the subject of madness or certain genre representations of it are consumed by particular age groups, genders, etc.

Another avenue for further research is player responses to the theme of madness. The present work has relied on a hypothetical player entity, based on the author’s own play experiences and participation in the gaming community (forums, social media, livestreams, etc.), in order to capture a sense
of the player’s engagement and emotional responses, which are vital to the creation of game narrative, but naturally cannot replace hard data collected from e.g. player surveys and interviews. For example, since a number of videogames dealing with madness requires the player to take care of a character afflicted with some form of madness, i.e. by managing their health and adapting play behavior to the character’s condition, it would be possible to study the emotional responses of a large number of players and allow for an examination of the effectiveness of such mechanisms at inspiring empathy and understanding.

Another avenue could be a study of players who are themselves either afflicted with or indirectly affected by mental illness (e.g. through the condition of a loved one), and compile data on the ways in which game narratives of madness affect them (e.g. representation/misrepresentation, feelings of inclusion/exclusion, etc.).

Game narratives in general are a vast, open field still waiting to be explored in further detail and greater numbers. Although it remains true, as ludologists have asserted many times in the past, that videogames do not need narratives in order to be videogames, it is also quite clear that the vast majority of developers want to use their games to tell stories. At the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) 2017 in Los Angeles, one of the largest promotional events in the industry, every upcoming game by a major development studio was shown to contain some form of narrative (which is likely to be echoed by E3’s Japanese equivalent, the Tokyo Game Show, in September of the same year). Even games that technically do not need an elaborate narrative in order to be engaging and successful have begun to dabble in storytelling (such as the soccer simulation series *FIFA*, which has added the story of a fictional young player’s rise to stardom). Although it is difficult to predict in which direction videogame narratives will evolve or with which techniques or gadgets they will experiment next (at the time of writing, a rising number of games are beginning to make use of the resurgence in virtual reality technology), one thing remains certain: Game narrative is going places, but it is certainly not going away.

That said, what use does the study of videogame narrative – and this thesis in particular – have in a non-US, and especially a European, context? Broadly speaking, although Europe is a much smaller market in terms of sales figures, videogames have also become an exceedingly popular form of entertainment here. A survey commissioned by the Interactive Software Federation of Europe (ISFE) in 2012, which examines game consumption and attitudes towards games in 16 European countries

---

(including Austria) among respondents aged 16 to 64, contains findings very similar to those conducted by its American counterpart, ESA. The ISFE study finds that, although data varies from country to country, on average a solid quarter of Europeans play videogames on a weekly basis, almost half of all gamers (45 percent) are female, and the median age of players is 35 years, meaning that the vast majority of dedicated players are adults. Europe is also home to a growing number of game developers whose creations are sold all over the world (in fact, one of the largest developer-publisher conglomerates, Ubisoft, is headquartered in Paris). Apart from the implications carried by the ISFE data, which all beg the same question (namely whether one can afford not to research this rising entertainment medium from as many angles as possible), the global influence of American popular culture has to be taken into consideration. In the context of this thesis, this means that American narratives and images of madness not only reach international audiences, but can even dominate in certain cases (e.g. the mass import of US television series). In terms of videogames, the American influence is especially strong due to the fact that the US is not only home to a vast number of development studios itself, but, as previously mentioned, functions almost as a “gateway” which videogames must traverse in order to reach the rest of the world (particularly Europe). Since this often entails tailoring games to American sensibilities, values, and popular culture, this means that American videogame narratives – of madness and any other imaginable topic – are shaping the experiences of players the world over. Although this thesis focuses on American game narratives, it is able to provide a basis for further research in European and other international contexts, for instance into the ways in which American culture affects game narratives on a global scale.

In conclusion, although many avenues remain open for exploration and not all points of interest could be pursued within its confines, this thesis has shown that videogames are far more than “things that go beep.” They are a creative force – a narrative force – which is in the process of spreading its stories all across the world. And no matter which side one falls on in debates on their intellectual value, artistic nature, social impact, practical application or the ways in which they tell their stories – videogames are here to stay. Ignoring them would be sheer madness.
Works Cited

Primary Sources


This War of Mine. Dev. 11 Bit Studios. PC: 11 Bit Studios, 2014. Game.


Secondary Sources


Activision Blizzard Inc. Web. 31 Aug. 2017


Ching, Dixie. “Passion Play: Will Wright and Games for Science Learning.” Cultural Studies of Science


<http://features.peta.org/CookingMama/>. 


"Full Category List." Grammy.org: The Official Site for the Recording Academy. 30 Aug. 2015
<https://www.grammy.org/recording-academy/announcement/category-list>.

<http://www.gamebits.net/other/mqp>.


“Nat Geo Games.” *National Geographic*. Web. 31 Aug. 2017


<http://www.nami.org/gtsTemplate09.cfm?Section=Grading_the_States_2009&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=75459>.


<http://www.square-enix.co.jp/nier/>.


<http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepercent>.


Solaris. Dir. Steven Soderbergh. 20th Century Fox, 2002. Film.


psychologist-as-warden-jail-and-mental-illness-intersect-in-chicago.html>

Wilson, Greg. “Off with their HUDs! Rethinking the Heads-Up Display in Console Game Design.”


Glossary

Ability
A character’s special talent or aptitude. Depending on the type of game, abilities may vary according to a character’s job (warrior, mage, etc.) or race (e.g. human, dwarf, elf, etc.) in order to provide different play styles and strategies.

Action/Adventure
Genre of games revolving around physical activity and exploration. Usually used as an umbrella term for games which do not fit into other established genres.

Arcade
Public game- and amusement parlor, frequently found in shopping malls and entertainment districts. Features carnival games, claw cranes, slots, pin-ball machines, and, of course, videogames.

Arcade (video)game/arcade cabinet
Arcade videogames are usually short, skill- and reaction-based competitive videogames. Many fighting or athletic videogames (e.g. dancing) have their debut in arcades before being released for the home market. They are typically housed inside colorful cabinets which feature a built-in screen and a fixed control unit. Often, the term “arcade game” is used to refer not just to the game software, but to the entire hardware setup as well.

AI/artificial intelligence (AI)
Algorithms that determine the behavior of NPCs, particularly enemies, to make them appear individualistic and intelligent. To a certain extent, the AI will adapt its behavior to the player’s actions in order to provide appropriate challenges. An unsophisticated or badly programmed AI can break immersion, e.g. by having enemies able to spot and target the player through solid walls.

Avatar
Virtual representation of the player character. Used more frequently in the context of games which allow for some form of customization of the player character’s physical appearance.

Backward compatibility
A feature that enables new game systems to play games and use peripheral devices developed for older systems. If a system is not backward compatible, users may resort to hacking or creating emulators.

Beat-'em-up/brawler/fighting game
Game genre whose mechanics are focused on hand-to-hand combat and rely on the player’s sense of timing and quick reflexes. Often used for competitive play.

Boss
A particularly strong enemy, often visually distinctive and of importance to the story. Typically found close to the end of a level. Sometimes, a mini-boss is introduced halfway through a level to provide an additional challenge. The ultimate (story-relevant) enemy in a game is usually referred to as the final boss; its appearance signals the climax of the story.
Also see: enemy

Cartridge
Plastic-encased piece of hardware used to store (and save) a game. The invention of cartridges allowed one and the same game console to play any number of games (previously, games were hardwired into the consoles themselves and could not be exchanged or removed). Now largely obsolete due to advances in storage technologies, smaller variants remain in use only for certain portable consoles.

CGI/computer-generated image(ry)
Refers to artwork or animation rendered on a computer. Although it does not denote a particular art style, it is most often associated with 3D animation. Can also be used to refer to computer-generated special effects in cinema.

Chiptunes
Genre of music born from the 8-bit sound chips used in computers and videogame consoles during the early 1980s. The idiosyncratic warbling electronic sound produced by these chips still enjoys considerable popularity among hobby composers, retro enthusiasts, and DJs.

Controller
Specialized gaming input device. Unlike a joystick, it is usually held in both hands and consists of a directional pad (d-pad) and specific command buttons.

Cosplay
Portmanteau of “costume” and “play.” Refers to the activity of dressing up as a character from a videogame, television series, comic book or film for specific events (conventions) that serve as a meeting place for pop culture...
enthusiasts.

**Cross-platform**
Describes the availability of one game on different game systems (platforms). A “cross-platform release” refers to the simultaneous publication of a game for multiple systems.

**Cut-scene**
Sometimes also spelled “cut-scene.” A non-interactive or largely non-interactive segment of the game. Used primarily to advance the plot or reward players with a visual treat for mastering particular challenges. Sometimes, the style of animation differs considerably from the standard gameplay style.

**Death**
Gameplay concept. Occurs when a character’s hit points (HP) are depleted or the player otherwise fails to master a challenge (e.g. by running out of time or breaking the rules). Frequently, this results in a game over. In some games, characters possess multiple lives in place of hit points that are depleted each time they fail or are defeated, allowing the game to continue until the last life is lost.

**Developer**
Term used to refer to either a single designer, a specific design team, a design studio or simply a company that creates videogames. Due to the complicated structure of the videogame industry, one developer can encompass several subsidiary studios responsible for different projects. Large developers often double as publishers.

**DLC/downloadable content**
Digital additions and/or merchandise for existing games to prolong or enhance the play experience.

**Easter egg**
A small, extraneous element concealed within the game by the developer, to be discovered by and amuse the players. Can take the form of hidden messages, in-jokes, secret levels, visual gags, references to other games, etc.

**Emulator**
A type of software used to simulate a particular operating system in order to play a game without access to the original operating system and corresponding hardware. Seen as questionable by many due to its association with software piracy; however, emulators are vital for the preservation of old games which are otherwise no longer readable to modern software and technology.

**Ending (bad, good, true/perfect/golden)**
Games often allow the player to arrive at different story conclusions depending on their in-game actions. Bad endings, as their name implies, involve a character’s failure, defeat or desertion of their values, and is often triggered by performing morally questionable actions or failing to be thorough in the completion of tasks. Good endings are at least somewhat emotionally positive and/or entail some level of success, though they imply room for improvement when a true/perfect/golden ending is also available (usually triggered upon completing all available tasks and/or doing particularly well in certain sections of the game). Not all games with multiple endings and divergent story paths employ this “rating” system; many prefer to treat the majority of endings as equal.

**Enemy**
An NPC character who is hostile towards the player character. The term can refer to any manner of NPC (e.g. humans, monsters, animals) and does not carry any ideological connotations. Does not apply to other in multiplayer games; other players and the characters under their control are referred to as “opponents” rather than enemies.

**Environment**
Navigable spaces within a game. Somewhat synonymous with level, although an environment typically evokes the idea of organic and (pseudo-)lifelike design, regardless of the visual style.

**Equipment**
A character’s wearable items (e.g. weapons, armor, tools, accessories). Equipment allows the player to customize and strengthen their character(s).

**Expansion pack**
Usually used in the context of older games to refer to a hefty bundle of content introduced after the initial release. Installing an expansion pack quite literally expands the game by introducing new areas to explore, new items, or even new story sequences. Nowadays often falls under the general label of DLC.

**Experience points/EXP/XP**
Numerical value accumulated for completing specific tasks within the game world. If enough experience (often stylized as XP or EXP) has been amassed, the character will level
up. Some games possess a similar points system for strengthening abilities.

**First-person (perspective)**
Camera perspective which limits the player's field of vision to the character's. The character him- or herself is not visible on screen.

**Game engine**
A core piece of game development software. Its functions (e.g. rendering of graphics, sound capabilities, physics, AI, etc.) are also often referred to as "engines" in their own right (e.g. "physics engine"). Due to the time and considerable cost of developing a game engine, they are often reused for other projects, or licensed to other developers.

**Game over**
A premature end to the game, triggered by the player character dying or the player otherwise failing to complete a particular goal or task. Not to be confused with a bad ending, which is part of an alternate story path the player can explore (true to its name, a bad ending usually involves a worsening of the protagonist's situation due to actions taken by the player).

**Gameplay**
A relatively nebulous term which refers, broadly speaking, to the way a game is played (e.g. which actions can be taken by the player) and/or the **game mechanics** used to play it. In gaming culture, the term can also be used to refer to an individual's subjective play experience or impression of the game mechanics' design (i.e. "good gameplay" or "bad gameplay").

**Gamer**
Person who plays videogames. Usually, a certain level of personal investment and knowledge of/participation in gaming subculture (forums, online communities, tournaments or other events, etc.) are implied.

**Game mechanics**
Broad term referring to the systems and means of player interaction of which a game is comprised. Can differ widely between individual titles, but tend to share some commonalities based on genre (e.g. the primary mechanics of a shooter/shooting game revolve around the handling of firearms).

**High score**
The highest number of points accumulated during one play session. Most prevalent in competitive games which rank participants based on the high score. Sometimes stylized as "hi-score."

**Hit points/Health points/HP**
Numerical value which measures a character's physical durability. Often rendered in the form of a gauge or other indicator which depletes or changes color as the character takes damage from enemy attacks or dangerous actions. Can be restored with items. (Some games alternatively refer to this value as "life points" or "LP")

**Home console**
An evolution of the arcade cabinet, this smaller-sized videogame device is used to play games at home, typically by connecting it to a TV. Unlike their arcade predecessors, modern home consoles are capable of running any number of compatible games. The latest generation also includes various multimedia functions, e.g. video streaming, live chat, screenshot capabilities, DVD movie players and internet browsing.

**Item**
Usable virtual object which can be discovered and consumed and/or collected by the player character for various purposes. If an item has a special, story-relevant status, it is often called a "key item."

**Leaderboard**
Virtual board which displays player **high score** rankings.

**Level**
a) A conceptually closed game environment associated with linear-progression games. Often separated by challenges and/or visual "themes" (e.g. ice level, fire level, etc.)
b) Numerical value representing the player character's growth in strength and/or skill.

**Live-action role-play/LARP**
An enhanced type of role-play which involves the players physically acting out their chosen roles, usually in costume and outdoors, similar to historical reenactments and Renaissance fairs.
MMORPG/MMO/Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game
A type of online game characterized by its immense player base and expansive virtual world. Participation is usually subscription-based.

Mini-game
A “game within the game” with its own set of rules and objectives (e.g. competitive fishing, target practice, quizzes, poker, racing, etc.). Mini-games are used to prolong, supplement and/or add variety to the play experience. They may possess story-relevance if they are integrated into a (side) quest.

Mod
Abbreviation of “modification”, refers to a specific type of player-created alteration of a game’s source code. Mods (unlike hacking) are not malicious or detrimental in nature; they are intended to provide an improved gameplay experience or some form of amusement to the players who download and install them. Developer stances towards mods are divided; some tacitly tolerate them, others actively forbid them, and still others welcome and encourage these expressions of programming creativity from their players.

Multiplayer
A game mode which allows for the simultaneous participation of multiple players, either on- or offline. Gameplay may be competitive or cooperative depending on the game.
Also see: single-player

NPC/non-player character/non-playable character
Friendly or neutral character not controlled by the player. In many games, NPCs are an integral part of the virtual world, filling it with life and character, providing information via dialogue snippets. Major NPCs possess story-relevance and often give out quests.

Over-the-shoulder (perspective)
Hybrid between first-person and third-person perspective. The field of vision is less limited than in first-person perspective, yet not as wide as in third-person perspective. The player character is partially visible, with the camera position fixed to slightly behind and above their shoulder.

Physics
Term which refers to the computational values which govern the physical laws of the game world and determine how objects respond to one another, e.g. collision detection, gravity, surface friction, object solidity. Programming errors may result in temporary failures of a game’s physics, which can result in inconvenient play experiences (e.g. characters becoming stuck inside walls). Certain mods deliberately disable various game physics in order to allow players to stage amusing antics.

Platform
The hardware and/or operating system used to play videogames (PCs, consoles, handhelds, smartphones, etc).

Platform game/platforming game
Genre of games which require the player to navigate maze-and jungle gym-like environments through climbing, jumping, etc. Gameplay is characterized by the need for sharp reflexes and precise timing.

Player character
Character controlled by the player in the game. Typically also the main character in story-driven games. In games with multiple protagonists, they are usually referred to as “playable characters.” Occasionally abbreviated to “PC,” though said abbreviation is rarely used due to its ambiguity.

Playthrough
Term referring a complete "run" through the game from beginning to end, not necessarily achieved in one
continuous session. Usually applied to longer, story-driven games rather than open-ended simulations.

**Portable console/handheld**
A small game console roughly equivalent in size to a modern mobile phone. Before the advent of smartphones, they were the only means of playing “on the go” (i.e. during a long commute). Though they have since lost some of their importance due to the growth of the mobile market, certain devices still enjoy widespread popularity.

**Procedural Generation**
A computing technique that creates and assembles data via algorithms. In videogames, the AI governing the game (“computer”) draws from preprogrammed data and assembles it “from moment to moment,” lending events and objects an air of spontaneity and uniqueness. The result is a vast amount of variety which requires comparatively little storage space.

**Publisher**
Much like literary publishing houses, videogame publishers handle the manufacturing, distribution and marketing of games by various developers. Large publishers often partially or entirely finance the games they publish. Certain developers are large enough to act as their own (and even others’) publisher, and publishers may expand their business into developing their own in-house games as well.

**Puzzle game**
Game genre characterized by the solving of riddles and puzzles of various types (e.g. finding hidden objects, solving math problems, optical illusions, etc.). Games of other types may also include puzzle sections or mini-games.

**Quest (main quest, side quest)**
A specific task or challenge posed to the player. Main quests are mandatory if the player wishes to progress through the game story, while side quests are optional. The completion of side quests usually offers up additional information about the virtual world, enriches the play experience, and grants certain advantages going forward. Information about ongoing and completed quests is sometimes stored in the “quest log.”

**Rating**
Age recommendation for a game (sometimes accompanied by content labels/warnings). Given out by the ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board) in North America and PEGI (Pan European Game Information) in Europe. Game ratings may vary across the globe, and are often influenced by the cultural sensibilities of a given country, region or time period.

**Rhythm game**
Game genre whose mechanics focus on the player’s sense of rhythm, typically requiring fast reflexes and good memory. Players must input displayed sequences of commands, usually in the context of music (dancing, playing an instrument, etc.). Popular in arcades and for competitive play.

**RPG/role-playing game (pen-and-paper, tabletop)**
Usually referred to by its acronym, the RPG is a type of videogame which allows the player to control a number of characters at the same time, i.e. to adopt different “roles” and experience the game from multiple point-of-view. Not to be confused with multiplayer, which allows multiple players to play together.

Non-virtual RPGs are pen-and-paper or tabletop role-playing games. Pen-and-paper RPGs involve players gathering to cooperatively act out a story; led by a game master (charged with enforcing the rules and providing guidance), the players assume to role of various characters,
whose profiles and abilities they sketch out on paper. **Tabletop RPGs** share the same principles and goals, but are characterized by the use of elaborate figurines, set pieces and playing boards.

**Sandbox game/open-world game**

Catch-all term for games which emphasize player freedom, non-linear story progression and present a vast virtual world with nearly unrestricted possibilities for exploration, similar to a real-world sandbox.

**Shooting game/shooter (first-person shooter, third-person shooter)**

Game genre whose **mechanics** center on the use of various fire weapons and its emphasis on combat and/or warfare.

**Simulation game**

Vaguely defined genre broadly characterized by the simulation of real-world activities, e.g. city planning, aircraft piloting, sports. One sub-genre is the **life-simulation game**, in which the player controls one or more characters, guiding them through life challenges and/or relationships (e.g. *The Sims*).

**Single-player game**

Game meant for one player (typically offline). Many modern single-player games feature an online multiplayer mode which is typically divorced from the challenges and events of the main game, and instead allows players to enjoy competitive or cooperative play on their own time.

**Spawnshaderespawn**

The manifestation of a character, **enemy** or object in the game, seemingly out of thin air. If a defeated character or enemy is revived/replaced by a new enemy of the same type, this is referred to as a **respawn**. Multiplayer games in particular utilize respawning in order to ensure that every player is able to complete all the quests. Locations where particular enemies appear with great frequency are sometimes called “spawn points.”

**Sprite**

Two-dimensional rendition of a character or object composed of individually assembled pixels.

**Strategy game**

Genre of game which requires players to outperform their opponents through careful planning and shrewd tactics. Typical elements of strategy games are economics (e.g. the production and trading of in-game goods and resources), exploration and information-gathering, politics (e.g. the formation of alliances), the building of infrastructure, and/or strategic warfare.

**Survival horror game**

Sub-genre of horror games which place the player character into a position of intense physical and emotional vulnerability.

**Third-person (perspective)**

Games characterized by the use of third-person camera perspective, meaning that the player’s field of vision is not restricted to the character’s (the character is fully visible).

**Unlock**

The act of unlocking refers to the completion of specific requirements in order to gain access to in-game content (e.g. additional characters, secret levels, valuable items). In gaming jargon, such content is often referred to as “unlockables.”

**World**

An ambiguous term which can refer to a closed level, the entirety of all play areas in the game, or the fictional virtual world itself (i.e. the laws and rules of the setting, its geographical features, population, etc.)
Appendix A: Games Cited and Mentioned

Note: Game franchises from which no individual installments have been cited or mentioned are indicated by the term “series” placed in parentheses after the main title. Publication information (i.e. the name of the platform) is given for the first installment only; the date of publication indicates the first as well as the last/most recent title to be released.


Quake. Dev. id Software. PC/MS-DOS: GT Interactive, 1996.


This War of Mine. Dev. 11 Bit Studios. PC: 11 Bit Studios, 2014.


Appendix B: Full-scale Illustrations
This map is available as an online supplement to this article at ps.psychiatryonline.org.

For a finer detail, an overall pattern of unmet need for prescribers and non-prescribers combined is meant to convey the shortage (from light to dark, indicating first to fourth quartiles, respectively). Figure 1

Figure 1

Unmet need for mental health professionals among counties with an overall shortage.