

# Well Played

a journal on video games,  
value and meaning

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## **Well Played**

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## A journal on video games, value and meaning

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# Preface

Drew Davidson

What makes a game good? or bad? or better?

The Well Played Journal is a forum for in-depth close readings of video games that parse out the various meanings to be found in the experience of playing a game. It is a reviewed journal open to submissions that will be released on a regular basis with high-quality essays.

Contributors are encouraged to analyze sequences in a game in detail in order to illustrate and interpret how the various components of a game can come together to create a fulfilling playing experience unique to this medium. Through contributors, the journal will provide a variety of perspectives on the value of games.

As with the three Well Played books, the term “well played” is being used in two senses. On the one hand, well played is to games as well read is to books. So, a person who reads books a lot is “well read” and a person who plays games a lot is “well played.” On the other hand, well played as in well done. So, a hand of poker can be “well played” by a person, and a game can be “well played” by the development team.

Contributors are encouraged looking at video games through both senses of “well played.” So, with well played as in well read, contributors are looking closely at the experience of playing a game. And with well played as in well done, contributors are looking at a game in terms of how well it is designed and developed.

The goal of the journal is to continue developing and defining a literacy of games as well as a sense of their value as an experience. Contributors are invited to also discuss games in general (ranging from tabletop, to big games and more) and how they are often designed for different fields (education, entertainment, etc) as we more fully develop a literacy around games and play. Contributors are encouraged to consider using screenshots and video of their gameplay in order to help illustrate their ideas. And we're open to suggestions on themed issues around a specific game or a topic across games.

Video games are a complex medium that merits careful interpretation and insightful analysis. By inviting contributors to look closely at video games and the experience of playing them, we hope to expand the discussion, and show how games are well played in a variety of ways.

Well Played session tracks are also being held at academic and industry conferences. The Well Played Journal will be published regularly. We won't develop a set schedule until we have a good sense of the amount of quality submissions. Our goal is to publish as often as we have great essays. There won't be a subscription, although as with all ETC Press publications, all issues will be available for download for free, and we'll offer print versions for sale through Lulu.com.





# **Time Tech and Tales: the fall and rise of the popularity of narration in games seen through *Monkey Island 2* and *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney***

**Emmanuel Eytan**

Entertainment Technology Center  
Carnegie Mellon University  
700 Technology Drive, Pittsburgh, PA 15219  
eeytan@andrew.cmu.edu

## **The game, the player, the gameplay: definitions**

I am writing this a few weeks after Tim Schafer raised almost three and a half million dollars on Kickstarter by expressing the mere intention of making a point-and-click adventure game. He didn't say anything about the game itself, just that his company, Double Fine, would make it. He also said that no publisher would ever fund such a game. And tens of thousands of people gave him over ten times as much money as he had asked. He needed 300,000 dollars for the game itself, he got over 3.2 million. There seems to be a divide going on here about what some people want, what some other people want and what people whose role it is to know what people want think. In other words, when potential players say they want games based on narration, no one is listening. Why is that?

I contributed to that Kickstarter project, maybe a little more than I should have. I have no idea if I would have if this had taken place a couple of years ago. The season for that is that I

gave up on games once. I don't mean that I had something urgent to do and I promised myself I'd keep away from playing until I was done. I meant that I stopped enjoying games and I gave up hope that I'd enjoy games again. Obviously, I was wrong, but that impression lasted longer than I would have imagined a couple of years earlier. I basically played almost no games, or no new games between 2000 and 2010. These were great years for games, some would argue. They'd go on, "Those were the years of *Halo* and *Call of Duty* and *Half Life* and *Guitar Hero* and *Grand Theft Auto* and *World of Warcraft*! If you don't like those, what do you like?" The answer for that would be *Monkey Island 1* and *2*, *Day of the Tentacle*, the *Gabriel Knight* series, *Cruise for a Corpse*, but also the classic Mario games and other platformers. I'm not saying that the games I listed first are bad. They were not just for me. They were games for "gamers." I had to accept that I was not, or at least no longer, a "gamer" and move on. In retrospect, that's not really what was going on.

In fact, there were many things going on. First of all, there is no such thing as a "gamer," or rather no fixed, standard definition for it. When I was saying to myself, "I am no longer a gamer," I was implying that people who "really" play video games were the ones who played shooters, or games with a lot of shooting. In 2000, *The Secret of Monkey Island* was no longer considered a "real game," at least not by my demographic. It was in 2D, it required lots of reading, it had no violence at all. A friend of mine told me that there was too much clicking. He was referring to the way one moved the characters on screen by clicking to where one wanted them to go as opposed to directing their movements with the keyboard or game pad.

The idea that games that rely strongly on narrative were not "real games" was at the time relatively recent. In the nineties, point-and-click adventure games were best-sellers. In the early eighties, text-based adventure games like *Zork*, *The Lurking Horror* and other treasures from Infocom were also best-sellers. So what happened?

Nowadays, games are sold in media stores and websites. They are next to the movies and music. But this was not always the case. It used to be that games were sold as software, not

unlike office software. Like any other piece of software, the features were listed as a list of numerical values on the side of the box. For adventure games, it was the number of lines of dialog, the number of rooms in the game, the duration of the music, the length of gameplay, the number of colors that could be displayed at a time. True, there are still such lists, but they are more akin to media content than to software features. At the time, one primary selling point of video games was technical innovation for the sake of technical innovation.

At first, this was not particularly harmful for adventure games. The fact that graphics were in VGA did not guarantee they'd be beautiful. But beautiful graphics existed, the ability to use VGA helped accomplish that, and beautiful graphics certainly added to the value of games.

I'd say that the beginning of trouble for narration in game came with Full Motion Video. This seems counterintuitive at first: surely video can only add to narrative content and having smooth animation or real-life actors offers much more powerful potential for emotional impact than the simple, minimal animation that were available earlier on. And that's certainly true, but using Full Motion Video also raised significantly the level of entry in game making. In other words: if you write a good game and have a few good artists and good programmers, you can make a good adventure game, but if you want to add video to the mix, you need actors, film directors, film editors, lighting designers, and many more tech people. And if any of them do a bad job, it's your entire game that's bad. And the best actors and directors were not originally that keen to put the best of their talents in games.

In the late nineties, Full Motion Video had become the main selling point of the games that featured it, rather than a tool, a medium for great content. Games like *Urban Runner*, or Sierra's *Phantasmagoria* are an example of games that maybe had a bit too much value pushed towards technical gimmicks than truly great content.

I would argue that the technical innovation that did the most harm to the appeal of games that focused on narration is 3D. Towards the end of the 2000-2010 decade video games were more or less synonymous with 3D. When there was mention of

“games” in a generic context for most of that decade, Flash games and Facebook games were rarely included, even though their popularity was exploding at the time. A useful comparison is romance novels, the type one can find in supermarkets. They are the most sold type of fiction in the world<sup>(1)</sup>, but when one just says “novel”, the image that comes to mind is more likely to be *Moby Dick* or *Pride and Prejudice*. Before big financial successes like Zynga’s, the popularity of Flash games were not enough to make them fit in the generic *perception* of what a game was.

The look and gameplay that come from using a 3D engine can be very detrimental to games, especially in the early days of 3D. The bulky, boxy graphics that were necessary to make games run on the computers of the time were suited to games like *Half Life*. The original *Half Life* took place in an industrial compound with long corridors, machines and pipes. There was a lot of flexibility in what the world could look like and so it didn’t go against the theme to make it match the technical limitations of the computers that would run it.

For a game like the third Gabriel Knight title, *Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned*, it was very different. The original *Half Life* was released in 1998 and *Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned* in 1999. While *Half Life*, a shooter, required the player character to run across vast expanses in a huge laboratory, *Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned*, took place in a small village in central France and required the player character to behave in a socially civilized manner, look carefully around several areas, and endear himself to other characters. In the former game, the ability to have full freedom of movement is liberating, running and shooting, hiding behind walls and crawling through pipes to sneak up on the enemy are a core part of the fun. For Gabriel Knight, it was an unnecessary complication. If I want Gabriel to pick up the phone, I want him to pick up the phone. Guiding him around the hotel lobby furniture is not part of the fun, it’s a major annoyance. But, apparently, it was thought at the time that adventure games had to be in 3D because from that point on, all games would be in 3D.

It is, in fact, possible to make a good 3D adventure games. The latter instances of the Tex Murphy series are a fine

example. But making the 3D fit in narrative-based games was and is still an extra complication. And it is not certain it is a necessary one. So why was 3D indispensable in the first place? Why was 3D like sound in film rather than color? When sound arrived, silent films very quickly stopped being made. But when color was made available, the transition was slow and the point could easily be made that it is still incomplete.

To understand the appeal of 3D, one must go back to the previously mentioned notion of what it is to be a “gamer.” That term is usually just used to mean “core gamer.” But not all people who play video games are core gamers. People who play *FarmVille*, *Wii Fit*, *Bejeweled* or *Angry Birds* are not core gamers. But the fall of the narrative-based game took place long before those became popular. And that is a crucial part of the issue.

Current core-player games focus on using complex graphics systems, themes that appeal to young males, a focus on speed and thrill. The large number of horror games and war games should serve as a testimony for that. They bring out thrill more than thought. Compare *BioShock* and *Loom*, for example. They hardly have any themes or mechanics in common. The slow pace of adventure games, the focus on reflection rather than thrill, these rebuke those who started identifying as gamers after the late nineties.

All this being said, games based on narrative continued to be made during the nineties. In many cases, narrative elements were slipped into other types of games. *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill* were such examples, with their complex narratives behind an action interface. Tim Schafer tried to meld adventure game-like story and dialog into his platformer, *Psychonauts*. But even then, there were a few games that were successful while relying on narrative at the very base of their mechanic.

Let's compare a classic adventure game of the nineties with a more recent one. Let's compare *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge* with *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*. *Monkey Island 2* was released in 1991 and *Phoenix Wright* in 2001, a mere ten years apart. Both were based purely on narrative and the two were released at very different times in very different contexts.

But before all that, let's describe each of the two games in chronological order. Then, let's give a look at how the gameplay of each game complements the game's story and aesthetics. Finally, I'll give a look at how the ten years that took place between the two games' release dates affected their design and content. For now, let's look at what the games look like, starting with *Monkey Island 2*.

### ***Monkey Island 2* and *Phoenix Wright*: either relics of the past or models for the future**

*Monkey Island 2* and *Phoenix Wright* are both adventure games. But *Monkey* is a game about pirates, an American point-and-click adventure game, originally for home computers, that relies heavily on tropes from the great American storytelling traditions, whereas *Phoenix* is a game about urban lawyers, a Japanese game for a handheld console that deals with topics typical of cold, drab urban settings, spun into a world of lightheartedness and fantasy, and to which a strong element of Japanese mysticism was added. (On a side note, I am only knows the English-language localization of *Phoenix* and may not be aware of all layers of meaning of the original Japanese story and texts.)

Both *Monkey Island 2* and *Phoenix Wright* tell a fairly linear story. *Monkey Island 2: Le Chuck's Revenge* is a sequel to the original game in the series, *The Secret of Monkey Island*, released in 1990. In *Monkey 2*, the player character and hero, the comically named Guybrush Threepwood, says in the introduction cutscene that he intends to find a legendary buried treasure, Big Whoop. The game is divided into four chapters. In the first, Guybrush loses all of his money to the first antagonist he encounters, Largo LaGrande. Guybrush finds himself stuck on a small inhabited island and, in order to leave and progress in the story, he must find four items. The altercation with Largo that ensues allows Guybrush's current antagonist to resurrect Guybrush's nemesis, the titular ghost pirate LeChuck. A character called "Voodoo Lady," who acts as Guybrush's guide, tells him that he must continue his original quest of finding Big

Whoop to survive LeChuck. Again, in order to do this, Guybrush must find four more objects. This is chapter 2. Chapter 3 takes place in LeChuck's fortress in which Guybrush finds himself imprisoned. Chapter 4 is the discovery and the revelation of the nature of Big Whoop.

In Chapters 1 and 2, for each set of four objects to be discovered, the objects can be found in any order. However, every step that leads to the discovery of one, helps to the discovery of another. The player is therefore constantly offered the choice to seek one object or another. For example, in order to get a piece of clothing from Largo, the player must enter Largo's room to place a bucket of mud over the entrance door left ajar so that the mud will fall on Largo and stain his clothes. But while inside the room, Guybrush will also find a toupee that will provide him with another object on his list of items to find.

The game is played by choosing verbs at the bottom of the screen and then clicking on items in the main gameplay area. For example, clicking on "Pick up" and then on a shovel shown on the main game screen will cause Guybrush to attempt to pick up the shovel. Like most adventure game characters, Guybrush has no physical limit on what he can keep on his person. He will claim not to be able to pick up things that are too large or too heavy, like buildings, furniture or even a bowling ball, but at one point in the game, he picks up the large figurehead of a sunken ship. There is therefore a strong suspension of disbelief in which interactions are available to Guybrush, with an implicit understanding that whether something is forbidden or allowed depends far less on the story's intrinsic coherence than on the player's effective enjoyment of story and gameplay.

Guybrush wanders through beautiful areas, first hand-painted then scanned, that depict mysterious locations typical of the great pirate stories: desert Caribbean islands, mysterious swamps, a terrifying fortress somehow set in a perpetual lightning storm. There was originally no voice characterization. Most of the soundtrack, in addition to simple but effective sound effects, was the music. *Monkey Island's* music style was strongly influenced by reggae, to fit its Caribbean theme and locations. Furthermore, the lead game designer, Ron

Gilbert, thought that the overall experience would be more immersive if the music adapted itself to the player's actions. An original music system called "iMuse" was therefore developed, that allowed just that. Transitions, music styles and some background musical movements seamlessly adapt precisely to the action, no matter when the player chooses to make things happen.

The dialog is concise, precise and extremely witty. In fact, high quality of writing was a staple of Gilbert's games and the studio he worked for, LucasArts, in general. Some lines are often quoted by fans, myself included. The wit of the dialog is not gratuitous: some of Guybrush's actions that might generally be viewed as so unethical as to make the character too unsympathetic are somehow compensated for by Guybrush's funny and astute comments. For example, Guybrush, at one point, has to resurrect a man for purely selfish reasons. When the newly resurrected character asks if he's dead, possible answers include telling him he's "cold as leftover pork chops," "stiff as a frozen footlong," "green as year-old pickle relish" or "crusty as a stale bun." This type of dialog often causes the player to wonder how Guybrush will comment and react to whatever happens next and strongly contributes to immerse the player in the world of *Monkey Island* by permanently keeping expectations high and thus stimulate agency, without the need to reward the player with abstract self-contained metrics such as points or achievements.

*Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* is also an adventure game. Similarly to *Monkey Island 2*, the main objective of the game is not to defeat enemies in physical combat or score points by solving geometric puzzles: it is to further a narrative plot by controlling the main character's actions within a preset narrative context.

In *Phoenix Wright*, the player character is a lawyer. Unlike *Monkey Island*, the interface changes slightly based on context: if the main character, the titular Phoenix, is in court, there will be one interface, if he's out investigating his case, there will be another. During the investigation, there is a point of view that is very similar to first person, but not quite the same: it is more static and more abstract than a real first person point of view.

There are four possible actions in this mode: the first two are move to another location and look at an item on the screen; plus, if there is another character on screen, it is possible to show them an item or to talk to them. Like Guybrush in *Monkey Island*, Phoenix seems to have an infinite capacity for his inventory. However, Phoenix's inventory is referred in-game as the "court record" and it is never made clear if the objects in the court record are actual, physical items or records that such items exist. In some cases it's clearly one, in others it's clearly the other, but most of the time, it's left ambiguous.

Characters are all depicted in medium-shots, with very simple and very expressive animations. A character's animation follows their mood and state of mind. They will have an animation for happiness, one for anger, and so forth, and these animations quickly change from one to the other within each piece of dialog. Furthermore, all characters have habits and ticks; such ticks can be a visible compulsion to scratch themselves, a nagging tendency to glance at their watch or clapping their hands in joy. All of these animations are highly effective at giving life and personalities to the characters without relying too much on naturalism to do so. Their exaggerated nature helps make sure that the overall tone of the game, which is about solving murders, remains light and fun.

Similarly to the characters' animations, the game has a finite set of music pieces, less linked to locations, like *Monkey Island's*, and more to moods. There is a piece of music for friendly location, like Phoenix's office, as well as music for tense location, like the murder scenes, and so forth. The repetition the player feels when they hear the same music for different locales is not unpleasant: once the meaning of a music piece has been learned, the player becomes accustomed to recognizing the mood when it occurs.

The game was originally released for the Game Boy Advance and fared rather poorly on that platform. It was localized to English, but that did not help sales much. Eventually, it was re-released with an updated interface for the Nintendo DS, with an extra chapter made specifically for this release, and sales exceeded all expectations. That means that *Phoenix*, contrary to

what one ought to expect, became successful as an obsolete release: the game hardly took advantage of the DS's resolution, of its 3D abilities or of its faster processor. It did make extensive use of the touchscreen, however, and that may have been part of its success, but the game was in no way a technological marvel.

The game opens as a trial is about to start, almost *in medias res*. From the start, it is established that the legal system of the game bears hardly any resemblance to any kind of real-life judicial court. Phoenix seems to get all of the legal training he needs in a few whispers from his employer, Mia Fey, while he's already in court. His first opponent, for the first chapter, is a clumsy prosecutor who's easy to defeat. There are few witnesses, and each one has a gap in their testimony. The player has to point out the inconsistencies in the evidence presented to them in order to make the story continue. All the witnesses are for the prosecution. There is no concept of legal discovery: witnesses are called at the whim of each side, and the evidence is gathered as the story goes. Objects mentioned in trial become part of the court record, sometimes as physical entities, sometimes as abstractions, just like everything in Phoenix's inventory.

In trial mode, the witnesses' testimonies are broken down in small pieces; each piece is shown in its own dialog screen. The player, through Wright, can either "press" the witness or present evidence. These two actions are accompanied by the two staple lines of the game, "Hold it!" and "Objection!" respectively. Pressing is usually free of negative consequence. Apart from the potentially wasted playtime, there is no downside in pressing a witness who has nothing more to say about a specific point. Presenting irrelevant evidence, however, will cost Phoenix credibility with the judge. He has credibility points, similarly to how a character would have health points in a fighting game, and when their count reaches zero, the game is over. Technically, the stakes are very small: it is easy to circumvent this limitation by carefully saving the game often, but, emotionally, is very effective in giving a feeling of consequence and is key to providing great agency. When Phoenix is about to present evidence, his remaining points, represented by question marks in the first game and by a meter gauge in the sequels, show the player how many

times Wright can upset the judge before losing the trial and being sent back to the last saved game.

The way the characters are animated, with their overly-expressive ticks and detailed idiosyncrasies, combined with the way the dialog is constructed as witty, personal and expressive, give the person on trial a very effective sense of pathos. I have actually turned off my console because I could not bear to hear the judge condemn a character I had grown attached to. A guilty verdict is represented by jail doors closing on the screen and a verdict of not guilty by confetti dropping in the courthouse and huge cheer from the crowd watching the trial. It is not explained why a court system that seems to greatly favor the prosecution would keep confetti specifically for verdicts of not guilty, but that is part of the very large chunk of suspension of disbelief required to enjoy the game.

The detail put into giving life and pathos to character can slow down the action a bit. I don't know of any research on the topic, but by my observation, the large amount of text is far less likely to upset a casual player, who will be charmed by the characters, dialogs and animations, than a core player who will become frustrated by the lack of interaction for the first few dozen minutes of gameplay. The difficulty curve is extremely progressive. The first cases are rather obvious whereas the last one, the one that was added for the Nintendo DS re-release, is much harder and less forgiving of mistakes.

## **From one game to the next: the direction of progress**

Now, let's take more of a side-by-side look at how these two games relate, first from an aesthetics point of view, then from a gameplay and narration perspective.

*Monkey Island 2* and *Phoenix Wright* look very different from one another, but not quite as different as one might expect. The former was released in the early nineties, but even though the latter is made of technology that's several generations more recent, it was designed for handheld devices with low graphical capabilities and low resolution. *Monkey* has very Western graphics and *Phoenix* very Japanese ones, the most obvious

instance of that is how the characters are drawn in the “manga” style, . In the English-language localization of *Phoenix*, the location of the game is never explicitly mentioned, but there are many hints that it is Los Angeles, California. The game and its sequels nevertheless feature many characters in traditional Japanese costumes, such as kimonos, and a few signs in Japanese. This adds to the charming absurdity of the game, rather than cause any damage to the experience. Similarly, in *Monkey Island 2*, Guybrush finds a telephone in the middle of the Caribbean jungle where he can call the game publisher's helpline for a useless hint.

And here, *Monkey* and *Phoenix* are both remarkable in their ability to accomplish something similar and difficult: balance absurdity, humor and pathos in such a way that the player is immersed, is driven to carry the story forward, and disregards the more absurd elements of gameplay as being part of the intentional absurdity of the game. In neither game does the absurdity diminish the stakes. And yet, neither game keeps any score of any kind. That said, the recent re-release of *Monkey Island 2: Special Edition* does, in fact, grade the player. That addition to the game, rather than add to the effective agency of the original, actually points out the way keeping score goes against the essential nature of what a game like *Monkey Island* is about. One of the criteria in the grading system is the time taken to complete each part of the game. But that criterion does not measure a skill that is important for the gameplay. True, for a first-time player, fast completion shows great skill in figuring out the puzzles. But it also shows a sad lack of curiosity in exploring the world of *Monkey Island 2*, its quirky characters, its beautiful locations and its clever mechanics. In a game like chess, for example, rewarding a player for playing quickly makes sense, but for a narrative and exploration-driven multimedia experience like *Monkey Island 2*, that sort of incentive is not unlike rewarding the players for playing as little of the game as possible. It is similar to reading a good book quickly by skipping pages, or even for just reading as fast as possible. While fast reading does require skills, these are not the skills that are truly relevant to the reading experience, they make reading an *obstacle* to content. It is

similarly counterproductive to create a mood where the actual gameplay is an obstacle as well.

*Monkey* and *Phoenix Wright* take a daring approach in the way they choose to drive the player to continue through the game. *Extra Credits*, a webcast about video game design, made a presentation about the “Skinner Box” in one of its early episodes(ii). In it, James Portnow and Daniel Floyd explain how a cleverly constructed points system can encourage people to play games “well past the point where it [is] fun,” thanks to an elaborate system of in-game rewards and achievements. They go on to present their point of view that such systems are often the result of lazy design and a cheap way of artificially summoning agency. They present alternatives to those techniques as better ways to keep the player engaged. The first one is mystery. Both *Monkey Island* and *Phoenix Wright* use mystery at the core, not only of their stories, but to some extent their gameplay. In *Phoenix*, the very existence of a cross-examination system taking up half of the game is to find out which people are lying, what their personal agenda is, how it fits in the greater scheme of the story and, in the end, who the real murderer is, and how that truth can be proven. In *Monkey*, the way Guybrush goes to explore several locations early on in the game, and how the world he has access to is divided into three islands, along with the fact that his explicit goal is to find a hidden treasure, all of those elements are carefully placed to drive the player to explore, to try things, to take chances. In the *Monkey Island* games, like in all Lucasfilm-produced adventure games of that era, death and dead-ends were impossible. The player could try the most ridiculous, daring, dangerous action, and the only downside would be to miss a funny situation or dialog.

For example, at one point in the game, Guybrush is reunited with his love interest, Elaine Marley. He is supposed to attempt to seduce her, but, even though he still loves her, he's mostly seducing her because he needs something from her. That attempt will always fail. The player should be aware early on that the attempt cannot be successful because allowing the player to seduce Elaine would remove an essential element of conflict from the plot and a large part of the quest from the gameplay. The

player can choose what Guybrush will tell Elaine. If the player wants to skip that dialog, they can simply insult her and she will walk away triggering the action necessary for the game to continue. But the player can also choose to play along with attempt to seduce Elaine, in which case a funny pseudo-melodramatic love scene will occur. Elaine's sharp answers to Guybrush's self-serving sweet words are charming and help the player genuinely care about her.

The final result is the same: Elaine will trigger an event that will make the story go forward. The rest of the story and dialog will not be affected, as far as the way they are displayed on the screen. But the identity of the characters will be somehow different: rather than change the content of what follows, how this dialog is played changes the context. If Guybrush makes a sincere attempt to seduce Elaine, he will be an egocentric, but overall well-meaning and caring would-be lover, and his main obstacle in seducing her will have been clumsiness and unfortunate circumstances. If he deliberately insults Elaine, he is a jerk and deserves all the abuse he gets from her. And he gets a lot. Elaine's attitude can play either as her taking a well-deserved revenge on him, or as fate itself torturing Guybrush through Elaine, as a tragicomic hero. Both work; both are enjoyable; both have a meaning that resonates with an engaged player. And, more importantly, given the way they are presented, the player is likely to self-select the point of the view that they will respond to the most. So the difference is absolutely minimal in terms of gameplay as well as on-screen narration, but important in how the story that is presented to the player will affect them and their understanding of the game.

Linearity is an issue worth mentioning for both *Monkey Island* and *Phoenix Wright*. Neither game offers multiple endings. That is, unless one counts the "game over" screens of *Phoenix*, which are presented as verdicts of "guilty"; but they are not canon to the story. When the concept of interactive fiction comes up, people often associate it with stories where the player chooses or affects the outcome. But the two examples described here, both of them popular and critical successes in adventure gaming or

interactive fiction, have single endings. What, then, is the point of the interaction?

When telling a story verbally, a good storyteller will often try and exhort guesses from their audience. They will seek to be interrupted only to challenge the audience's assumptions. The character of Sophia in *The Golden Girls* does this often. "Sicily, 1932," she will say. "Three men are leaning over a camel." Then Dorothy will interrupt with, "A camel, Ma?" "It was cigarette!" Sophia will answer. This is funny to watch in a sitcom but it is even more enjoyable when it occurs in real life. Because one has the ability to interrupt the storyteller, a storyteller who refuses to be interrupted does not exploit his or her medium fully.

Adventure gaming and interactive fiction are very similar. One *could* read or watch the adventures of Guybrush Threepwood or Phoenix Wright, but the mysteries and clues are organized in such a way that having to find out what to do next, even if it is fairly linear, gives the player an absolutely thrilling and utterly enjoyable "a-ha!" moment when they figure something out. It is very similar to when a skillful story teller pauses to say something like, "And guess what she found inside...!" with just enough buildup so that it takes a couple of tries, some of which provide intermediary hints, and then the final answer is not only surprising but comes to the audience's minds seconds before they are actually told.

Bad adventure-telling, bad interactive fiction, is about giving the player a wide array of meaningless choices. They have a choice, but these choices don't mean much. Choice is not enjoyable unless it carries both emotional meaning and stakes rather than actual practical consequence. In good interactive fiction, the choices given may not fork the story at all, but the player has to be constantly guessing to figure out what to do next, feel engaged and immersed, be motivated by curiosity and engagement to want to guide their character just a bit further to the next point in the story.

We are far away from the issues of how accurate a 3D shader is, or about which weapon is best to shoot which enemy. After all these explanations, it should make sense as to why narrative-based games could not keep up with genres that could

be promoted through technical advances. A faster GPU won't help in making a player character's love interest have a more endearing personality.

## Legacy

*Monkey Island* takes place over many locations and could originally only be played on a fixed computer. In *Phoenix*, by contrast, there are very few locations that can be visited by the player within the course of each case, relatively few characters and even less interaction. During the investigation phases, the elements of dialog that Phoenix needs to hear in order for the action to progress, and the physical clues he must find can be discovered in a somewhat variable order. Nevertheless, the player is much more guided than in *Monkey Island*. The setting is more familiar, a contemporary big city with male characters who wear ties and suits. The trial phases of *Phoenix* are extremely linear. Sometimes, the player will figure out elements of the story well before Phoenix does and will find what appears to be proof in Phoenix's court record. If the story requires that piece of evidence to be used later in the game, any attempt to do so earlier will be penalized, no matter how much it would make sense to a human observer of the game being played. And the fact that presenting the wrong evidence will lead to apparent harmful consequences adds great weight to those choices in the player's mind.

But such linearity, even though it can feel constrictive and frustrated to a well-seasoned core player, is comforting and snug for a casual player. They know they are not wandering too far at random on the wrong path. The game would not let them. *Monkey*, with its lack of death and dead ends, provides the same guarantees, but to a casual player, such guarantees are not apparent. When one is stuck in *Monkey Island*, one wonders if a bug has not allowed one to wander somewhere without an object they need to progress from there on, no matter how often we are told that such a situation is impossible. In *Phoenix*, the way progress is always available to the player is much more visible and more immediately apparent. This lowers the level of entry to the game greatly.

And this is really the sort of design choice that makes a game like *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, a rightful descendent of *Monkey Island* and games of that era despite their superficial differences. Rather than add complexity, which is how a naïve observer might assume they would have progressed, or multiply the number of possible endings, the creators of *Phoenix Wright* helped the player feel more guided and safer in making choices by going out of their way to lower the barrier of entry to the game. They keep the player engaged and motivated with a story that is filled with suspense, pathos and that allows just the right amount of suspension of disbelief. It is true that the amount of suspension of disbelief that *Phoenix Wright* relies on is very high, but it is never gratuitous. Absurdity in *Phoenix Wright*, or for that matter in *Monkey Island*, is never raised to such a level where the player ends up feeling a disconnect with the game and loses engagement. Some of the following installments in the *Monkey Island* franchise did just that, so did a number of other unrelated adventure games. *Monkey Island* and *Phoenix Wright* deserve praise for not going too far in that direction.

And so, *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge* and *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* are two exemplary instances of how fiction can be interactive and what to aim for if one were to attempt to build a similar work. They rely on deep, meaningful, engaging stories, situations and characters, without keeping a tone that is so serious that it feels pretentious. They make the player's interactions *feel* meaningful, no matter whether they, in fact, have practical consequences or not.

The way *Phoenix Wright's* relatively large popularity coincided with the design decision to make the game simpler and more restrictive rather than more complex is to me one of many clear indicators that adventure games have become a genre that should be directed primarily towards casual gamers. And yet, it still carries its legacy identity of being a core gamer's genre. Trying to sell adventure games to those who identify as gamers has failed since about the year 2000, mostly because the demographic that is actually likely to enjoy adventure games, casual players, does not really identify as gamers at all.

Casual gamers tend not to care about pixel shaders, 3D sound or fragging in multiplayer. They would probably care more about plot lines being deep and yet flexible, about motivations being complex yet believable, about the world they'd visit being intriguing and yet reassuring. One would feel comfortable escaping to, and both *Monkey* and *Phoenix* provide such escapism.

The recent success of Tim Schafer's Double Fine Adventure Kickstarter pledge drive has given new life to the debate on whether adventure games could be rescued. And this is where my choice of taking *Monkey Island 2* and the first *Phoenix Wright* games as case studies can be seen as slightly hypocritical. One is over twenty years old, the other is over ten years old. It's worth looking at what has happened since then.

There are much more recent games that have tried to sell themselves as recent successors of adventure games. One is the *Uncharted* series and another would be *L.A. Noire*. The *Uncharted* series ties complex, well-structured and often well-acted story to games that focus not only on action but also on exploration and mystery. *L.A. Noire* skillfully mixes elements of action games and driving games with detective stories and an investigation system rather reminiscent of the *Phoenix Wright* series. Are these the descendants of adventure games?

The answer to this question is subjective in nature and it would not be fair to present it as anything more than an opinion, although hopefully a well-educated one. I, for one, would argue that they are not essentially adventure games and for many reasons. *Uncharted* puts a strong focus on fighting and shooting. I was lucky enough to meet Neil Druckmann, one of the main designers for *Uncharted*. He told me that an aspect of the game that set *Uncharted* apart from other action games was that they always provided strong, meaningful context to the action sequences. So, in *Uncharted*, the adventure element is the context to the main aspect of gameplay which is more action-oriented. A similar argument could be made for *L.A. Noire*: yes, there is a heavy focus on story and investigation in it, but in the end, the game keeps score. The game is far more about winning than it is about exploring. While *L.A. Noire* may be an

excellent game in its genre, it is not, essentially an adventure game, or a game *based* on narration.

## **The Myth of the Universal Game Is Over**

Until about ten or fifteen years ago, games were just games, they were for a small, very specialized market of children, teenagers and hard-core hobbyists. Even if that was not the case, such was the perception. Later, the game-playing demographic got split into core gamers and casual players. Perception took some time to catch up to that. Now, there is a third, more subtle category to take in consideration, still outside of most people's perception: niche games. The upcoming project from Double Fine fits in that category. The game that made that class of game popular was the 2009 game *Braid*. It was too technically simple to be a core game, far too complex in gameplay to be a casual game, and overall far too commercially successful to be ignored. Since then, more and more games have come to fit into that category. Narrative-based games may turn out to mostly fit there and to have retroactively fit there before it even was an explicitly established category.

In the very long term, I think that adventure games may be fated to become games for casual players, but in the meantime, their place really does belong among the niche game category. During the eighties, what made a great adventure was content. The fact that Infocom managed to gain huge respect by making text games is an example of how it was really about the story. In the nineties, the time of *Monkey Island 2*, technology had begun to be part of the appeal, and in the 2000s it had taken main stage. A low-tech adventure like *Phoenix Wright* being so successful in the West was an aberration, an exception to the rules. But now, a few years after *Braid*, time has mitigated the conflict between tech and tale. There are now more and more cases where the tech is no longer that important. Casual games are the most obvious example of this.

In niche games, technology is important but in a different way. It's layered deep beneath aesthetics, story and gameplay. Games with a strong focus on quality dialog, experimental story

and narrative-based gameplay will need, at least at first to fit into that category. It is the category that fills the gap mentioned at the beginning of this essay between what people want and what they are offered, the gap that explains why people are willing to give millions of dollars to Tim Schafer for a project that no publisher would agree to get near.

No matter what unfolds, narrative-based games in general and adventure games in particular look they have a future after all. Time will tell what it's made of.

## Endnotes

(<sup>i</sup>) Romance novels statistics from the Romance Writers of America Website <[http://www.rwa.org/cs/the\\_romance\\_genre/romance\\_literature\\_statistics](http://www.rwa.org/cs/the_romance_genre/romance_literature_statistics)> retrieved April 9, 2012

(<sup>ii</sup>) Extra Credits: The Skinner Box <<http://penny-arcade.com/patv/episode/the-skinner-box>>, accessed Wednesday, November 2, 2011, by James Portnow, Daniel Floyd and Alison Theus.

# Queue'd Up: The Functioning of Randomized Groups in World of Warcraft

**Charles Ecenbarger II**

Syracuse University

[cwecenba@syr.edu](mailto:cwecenba@syr.edu)

## **Introduction**

*World of Warcraft* has risen to critical success since its release in November of 2004 (Zenke, 2008). The Guinness Book of World Records lists *World of Warcraft* (WoW) as the most popular Massive Online Multiplayer game as well as holding the record for most subscribers of any online game in the world. Since its inception in 2004, *WoW* has gone through many stages in game play development. Through additions such as new dungeons for adventurers to explore or battle arenas for players to compete against one another, Blizzard, the developer of *World of Warcraft*, has done the best they can to keep the game fresh and interesting for the people who pay monthly for their game.

*World of Warcraft* has left a substantial footprint when it comes to online gaming. Nearly every new game in the genre attempts to live up to the standards that *WoW* has set and none have come even remotely close, judging solely based on subscriptions. Recently, a new Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) called *Star Wars: The Old Republic* was released and, although having a great deal of success in its own right, has still failed to reach the subscribership of *WoW* (Schiesel, 2011). By having the largest player base in

MMORPG's, *World of Warcraft* becomes the ideal setting to understand the development of communication within small groups in online virtual worlds.

There are many different online multiplayer games, ranging from shooters to roleplaying games. Each genre of game has its own unique traits when it comes to the player base that is participating in the different virtual worlds. The players of *World of Warcraft* have roots in many different games, whether they started playing *WoW* from the time it was released or if they joined up years later - by using this specific game as a baseline and applying Bruce Tuckman's popular model of group communication, we can distinguish the different stages of group communication within online virtual worlds.

Although *WoW* can be played without ever entering a group, is it highly unlikely due to the nature of an MMORPG. One of the main components of any online game is the ability to play with other people; otherwise, there would be no reason to allow online gameplay. From the very first moments of entering *World of Warcraft*, players have the ability to group with one another; this ability lasts until the very end of the game where the only goals left are ones that involve grouping with one another to accomplish the largest tasks.

The importance of group interaction in *World of Warcraft* allows for the analysis of group dynamics that occur in online gameplay. Identifying the different stages of development a group experiences in an online game, can lead to a better understanding of what makes a group work well together. It is not uncommon for online groups to fall apart due to poor group communication. By examining each stage individually and searching for new avenues of research into these specified areas, a better understanding of how to create a functional, working group within these environments may be gained.

## Background

Online gaming is obviously a product of the internet generation, however, the pivotal social game came in 1974 with the release of *Dungeons and Dragons* (Radoff, 2010) – a pen and paper roleplaying game where players group together in reality to take the role of an adventurer, advance their character by slaying monsters, and progress through an intricate storyline told by the Dungeon Master (the player who runs the game and crafts the story the adventurers will embark on). Although a crude description, these are, at their core, the very same mechanics seen in modern online role playing games.

Players band together to experience quests, adventures, and dungeons within the virtual world, while at the same time advancing their character and set of skills which they can bring to a group. The story is no longer told by a Dungeon Master, but crafted by the game developers who lead the players through an epic journey, in the case of *World of Warcraft*, a journey that has spanned nearly eight years. Rather than meeting once a week or month like many *Dungeon and Dragon* groups did (and still do), players can now log in to their game whenever they want and always find people to play with. One of the key aspects of *World of Warcraft* or any massive online multiplayer game is the access to people. At any given point, you can log into one of these games and interact with another person or group of people. Because of this aspect, online groups are forming and falling apart, literally 24 hours a day.

Communication is one of the core mechanics of any online game. By connecting to the internet and logging into a game service, a player is opening the communicative door with hundreds of thousands of different people. *World of Warcraft* has a built in function, known as *Dungeon Finder*, which allows a player to join a randomized group of 5 or 25 players who will make their way through a dungeon in order to fight an end boss and all his minions along the way. These are commonly referred to as instances, raids or dungeons. Communication occurs in a variety of ways within these random groups. The most common is

the in-game chat method; however, given the shared knowledge of most dungeons there is not a lot of text based discourse. In some of the more complex instances, specifically the 25-man raids, third party Voiceover IP (VoIP) programs are generally used to facilitate communication. These programs allow for players to speak with one another from anywhere in the world by simply downloading a program and connecting to a server. Ventrilo and Teamspeak are two of the most commonly used VoIP programs in gaming. In many cases, players will connect to one another's servers in order to just listen and take direction. It is not always the case that everyone must be able to speak, but listening for direction can be imperative. When adding this dynamic into communication within random groups, we can normally identify a group leader more clearly. I have also begun identifying a series of nonverbal cues that *WoW* players have developed. By positioning their character a certain way, using emotes, or using character movement (strafing, running back and forth, spinning), a player can communicate specific things that others could understand – this is a subject I have recently began more research on.

Another option for players is the 10-player dungeons, but these groups must be put together through manual means, such as by asking people to join their group. The level of randomness in these groups is far less and the stages of development are slightly different due to predetermined leadership, which can affect the development of a group as will be explained later in the paper. The amount of players it takes to move through one of these instances is represented by the level of difficulty as well. For example, a 5-player instance is not as difficult as a 25-player instance in terms of coordinating and group effort. There are other factors that can play a role in the difficulty of an instance, such as player skill and character advancement; however, the effect of these two factors is minimal on the group development process. The main objective of this article is to focus on the communicative process and how it unfolds in these random groups.

## **Method**

Having spent more than 10 years playing online multiplayer games and six years of *World of Warcraft* has led me to observe the following stages in full effect. To confirm the following stages, I have also consulted with others who have spent an abundant amount of time within the confines of the virtual world. By outlining the different stages a randomly generated group will experience, we leave the door open for further research and discovery into the dynamics of online game play. I have also applied research in related fields, such as group decision making and identity formation, to the context of online group development. When dealing with randomly generated ad hoc groups, the decision making process and the assumptions the group members have of one another can affect how the group develops.

Bruce Tuckman's Stages of Group Development is a highly regarded model for small group communication. In the case of online games, the different stages of his model (forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning) (Tuckman, 1965) can be applied to group development; however, game design features may bring forth limitations of the model due to its broad view. When we take shared knowledge and the randomness of group members, deeper analysis into the stages is necessary for full understanding. By using the broad idea of the Tuckman model and applying my own research and findings, I have evaluated the stages of online group development between players who are randomly placed in a group.

## **Analysis**

### **Forming/Disclosure**

When using the *Random Dungeon Finder* to be paired with other players, the group is formed once all the group slots have been filled. From there, the group members are transported to the dungeon that they will be working together to conquer. I put

the forming and disclosure stage together because disclosure happens right away with online groups. As soon as group members are able to see who they are grouped with, the first impression given (Smith, 2006) is through the name a player has chosen for their character. Players are able to name their characters almost anything that they would like, and the thoughtfulness or lack thereof put into a name usually calls for assumptions from other players. For example, individuals may assume a player named "CHEEZBIZKIT" would be less reliable than "Lunastar." The first impression given off is not binding, but it can play a role in how players view one another. Along the same lines, the visual representation of a player's character can matter as well (Altschuller & Benbunan-Fich, 2010). If a player goes against norms and goes out of their way to make their character look strange, funny, or just different – it may play a role in the judgments others pass based on how this player will act. These first impressions may or may not have a lasting impression on the group and their success. In the larger instances (10 or 25 person groups) there is more room for error in the strategies that are used to complete tasks. This is because other group members can assist each other in areas where one may be lacking. Therefore, in larger dungeons, first impressions may not have as much of an effect.

Once the group becomes oriented, discussion occurs between the members to gauge the level of experience each individual has. Generally, a group has a level of shared knowledge of the particular dungeon they are faced with; most of the disclosure is distinguishing who has completed the dungeon and who has not. This information can be derived from a person's silence or the admission of not having the same level of experience as the others. For example, one of the videos analyzed for this research was a 25-man raid attempting *The Dragon Soul* instance for the first time on test servers prior to a patch. In this particular case, the raid was completely new to everyone and the only shared knowledge was based off the little information that was available on the internet at the time. As the group is loaded into the dungeon, one player (*Celias*) quickly

began giving direction while the rest of the raid remained silent. Since there were no other options given, no other players contested *Celias*, it was assumed he had the most knowledge of the encounter; thus allowing for him to emerge as the leader of this group of players.

## **Emergent Leadership**

A leader is assumed after the disclosure stage. Leadership is indicated through a function in game that randomly appoints a leader, but this is more titular than anything else. Through the disclosure of past conquests in the game, a leader emerges and becomes the organizer of how the group will proceed with a task. It is not always verbalized or codified who the group leader is, but as the group functions as a team, it is clear through the interactions as to who is in charge. More often than not, the leader is the most vocal about what the group should be doing, how they should be doing it, and usually is not challenged. In most cases, players are fine with one person directing their group because of the shared understanding of the tasks. When things are going well, this leadership is rarely challenged. It is not until the group begins to falter or fail at their task that their role as leader is challenged.

Because of the need for shared knowledge of dungeons and the strategies to complete the tasks, the leadership is very much a directing role. Leadership being reduced to direction at times is largely due to theorycrafting, which is the quantifying of game mechanics in order to maximize player potential (WoWWiki, 2011). Players are expected to have a deep understanding of their character - this is due to the extensive amount of information available on each playable class/race in the game. With this sort of information available, the leadership role is changed to a directing role because players are assumed to understand their class and how to play it without any instruction. This type of quantification allows players performance to be based on in game stat counters (Ask, 2011) often called DPS meters. Therefore, the leader of a group must only ensure that everyone understands the basic mechanics of an encounter

and watch the stat counters to ensure group members are performing adequately. These benchmarks include but are not limited to: Damage Per Second, Healing Per Second, Overall Damage, and Overall Healing. These statistical measures have risen out of theorycrafting and a reliance on quantifiable evidence for what will work best in any given encounter. More often than not, the player who emerges as the leader in a group will have an advanced understanding of these benchmarks. Theorycrafting has allowed for players to fine tune their characters to their maximum potential, assuming they are willing to take the time to play the way someone else has dictated to them. However there are multiple ways to complete a goal in a dungeon, and the person who has risen to the rank of group leader is the one who decides what would be best for the group. This player will also relay any information needed to those who do not have the same level of experience to make sure everyone is on the same page; all of this ties together into the quality of leadership. The leader of the group has the ability to influence the attitude of the group (Heise, 1977). If the group leader is exuding a negative attitude it will be reflected by the members of the group. Strong communication skills and the ability to facilitate group cohesion are imperative for leadership in virtual worlds.

## **Execution**

The execution stage is where shared knowledge and understanding is most prevalent. By the time players begin using the group finding tool extensively, they have played the game for a significant amount of time. In most cases, players are aware of the core game mechanics and how to manipulate them in order to achieve their goals. Understanding the goal that the group is trying to accomplish and simply knowing how to play their chosen character correctly are two parts of the shared understanding players must have in order to execute their strategy without any setbacks.

There is also an abundance of outside sources players may use to help further the shared knowledge. Wikipedia pages, tutorial videos, and various game guides are all available to

players and help to create a shared understanding of *WoW*. There are several ways of achieving different goals throughout the game; however, they are rarely explored due to the shared understanding of the different tasks. Once a group of players, usually not randomly generated, has accomplished a goal efficiently and share their experience – the manner in which they accomplished the goal becomes the norm. By sharing their experience on YouTube, different websites, or databases – they create an understanding of how a task is to be completed.

Due to the wealth of information that is available to players, they have learned how to adapt to almost any situation. As discussed earlier, the idea of theorycrafting is simply one way players have learned to manipulate the game. By breaking the skills and attributes down into numbers and formulating equations, players have found ways to maximize their character's potential. It is not uncommon for players to obtain pieces of gear that may seem trivial to a novice player, but when in the reality of the game, this is the best possible piece of equipment a player could have. This type of manipulation of the attribute system along with an understanding of a skill rotation (the order in which players use their skills to maximize their output), allows for players to be an asset to their group by executing to their fullest potential. The other ways player have adapted in order to achieve goals is through strategizing dungeon encounters. Countless hours are spent inside instances by dedicated players in order to determine the most efficient way to "down" a boss. The trial and error process of a new encounter can take days, weeks, or even months for a well-organized group to overcome. Vodka, a top US raiding guild, spent well over a month attempting to defeat *Deathwing*. It was a long process of learning to understanding the mechanics of the encounter, learning how to use all the available resources in their favor, and then relying on one another in order to execute systematically in order to defeat the boss (Grafarion, 2012).

To use an example from my own experience - back when *Ulduar* was first released one of the bosses, *Igniss the Furnace*

*Master*, was incredibly difficult to get past. At that time many groups were merely skipping him and moving on to more obtainable bosses. However, my guild spent was determined to be the first on the server to kill this particular boss. We had spent hours upon hours testing different methods. We would randomly place *Igniss* in different locations, we would try different group combinations, we would try different spells. At this point it was still very early in *Ulduar's* release and there was not a whole lot of information on how to beat *Igniss*, so a lot of what we were doing was trial and error. It took nearly a full week of attempting to kill him before we finally were able to overcome. In the end, we tested and tried different approaches until we figured out what was working for our group. We tested, probably, hundreds of different methods and combinations in order to find the best way that worked for us. What made the difference is that we learned a specific skilled used by Hunters could alleviate the duration of one of *Igniss'* abilities, which ultimately ended up being the turning point for our group.

The perseverance of groups such as the aforementioned is the way players expand their knowledge of the game. They gain better understanding of the mechanics and how to use them in their favor. When organized groups take the time to share their experience to the *WoW* community, they allow for players to advance themselves and each other because there is a baseline of understanding. In order to be an asset to the group, a player must be able to execute the basic strategies that are put forth by organized groups and mimicked by random groups.

Most players are attuned to the procedures that a group must partake in because they have a reason to do so. By not knowing how to complete a task, they are hindering their own personal character progression – whether it's earning new armor pieces or a new weapon that can help make their character stronger. The sense of achievement when completing the dungeons and the rewards that you can receive for doing so is what keeps players together and forming groups. In essence, the apex of the game is to progress your character as much as

possible – without cohesive communication within small groups, this milestone is very difficult.

It is the leader's role to direct the way in which the group will accomplish their goal, but the manner in which he does this is based on shared knowledge that the whole group is assumed to have. This is why I find the leaders to have more of a director's role than an actual leader's role since they are simply making sure everyone follows an understood plan. Due to shared knowledge and a wealth of information that is available on different goals within *WoW*, a group's leader simply has to assign tasks and make sure the group members know what to do, as opposed to continuously giving orders and direction on how each person should be playing. It is very much a *laissez-faire* type of leadership (Judge & Piccolo, 2004) within the confines of *World of Warcraft*.

## **Breakpoints**

Due to the amount of options a group has upon task completion, I find Marshall Poole's idea of breakpoints (1983) to apply quite nicely. As defined by Poole, a breakpoint is when the focus of the group is shifted, whether it is because they are moving to a different task, or a failure in a prior task and they must try again - Poole's idea of a breakpoint is just a moment within the group where they take a new direction. In regards to *World of Warcraft*, I find that upon the completion of a task, a group's focus can shift in various directions. Usually the final stage of a group model would be considered adjournment; in the case of virtual groups however, adjournment is not always the case.

That said, the most common avenue for a group is adjourning. In most cases, after a dungeon has been completed, the group will split apart and go their own way or reenter the *Dungeon Finder* queue and create a new group. Each individual has their own reasoning for leaving the group and moving on - perhaps some of their friends logged into the game and they went to group with them or sometimes players just enjoy grouping

when they need to and playing on their own the rest of the time. In most cases, members simply consider the task to be complete and move on from their group and take up other activities within the game.

Upon task completion, the group may not always adjourn. Some or all members may decide to stay together and complete another task. Given the option, if the group worked well together, players may decide to move forth into another dungeon and continue working together. In some cases, only certain members may want to stay together and continue working as a group. When this happens, the remaining group members reenter the *Dungeon Finder* or invite players they may already be acquainted with to complete their group. I have identified this breakpoint as *continuing*.

Another observed breakpoint can happen at any stage of the group process. Players may be incapable of working with one another and the group may disband prior to task completion. Occasionally there will be specific members who are unable to work with other members and they will voluntarily leave the group, allowing the remaining members to replace them with the *Dungeon Finder* tool or with people they may already be acquainted with. I have identified this breakpoint as *restructuring*.

Groups who are struggling with certain goals may decide to change the approach to the situation they are using. If a leader's direction is not working, the group may decide upon a new way of handling a task and a new leader may arise. This *power shift* usually happens very subtly and is almost unnoticeable. It is obvious to most groups when the direction of the leader is not working and it is time to try something new. The most common reason for a change in leadership is due to task failure. When a group is struggling with a task, it is up to the leader to initiate conversation as to why or simply make the changes. If the leader fails to do so, another group member usually steps in and fills the leadership role. In some cases the

ousted leader may be resentful, but will generally at least attempt the newly decided upon plan.

One of the least common breakpoints happens when players end up working so well together, that they decide to work with one another on larger scales. Within *World of Warcraft* there are large groups known as *Guilds* that are collections of people who are in pursuit of a common goal. Guilds themselves are an interesting dynamic of MMORPGs, many are formed from players grouping with random individuals and forming friendships. However, due to a more structured nature and the interpersonal relationships between guild mates, the group dynamics are much different and beyond the scope of this article. Although it is uncommon for guilds to form or players to join guilds through this form of grouping, it can happen. In most cases, players simply become friends without ever joining one another's guild or forming a new guild. Certain functions within *WoW* allow for players to add each other to a "Friends List" so they can keep in contact. I've identified this breakpoint as *forming* – whether it is friendship or a guild, the term applies nicely.

There is always the possibility of *task failure* within a group. Some goals or tasks may be too complex or challenging for a group and they simply cannot finish. *Task failure* can lead to two types of breakpoints. As identified already, *restructuring* can occur if certain members of the group decide they want to continue on with a different dungeon or *disbanding* may occur. *Disbanding* is when each group member goes their own way after *task failure*. The members that choose to disband may reenter the *Dungeon Finder* queue in hopes of being paired with different players or they may try to form their own group out of people that they know – which reduces the chances of *task failure* in most cases.

## **Conclusion**

Online gaming has a vast audience that millions upon millions of people immerse themselves in on a daily basis. *World of Warcraft* allows us to observe how randomly generated groups

can function positively or negatively. Laying out the stages of development that these ad hoc groups participate in allows for further study into the dynamics of small group communication in virtual worlds. The stages that players go through are not something commonly thought about, although they do understand that they are going through a process. The importance of turning this tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge can make the difference in whether a group is able to function positively or negatively. When we illustrate how a group should be functioning during the stages of development, it allows for reflection and possibly more productive problem solving. If we look at each dungeon as a series of tests (Rothman, 2011), the problem solving aspect will be illuminated. Each instance has its own unique set of problems that players must learn to overcome; the way in which this is done varies depending on the classes involved, skill level and sometimes how good a player's gear is. When players have to communicate with one another and adapt to certain situations based on the limitations of their group, effective group problem solving and critical thinking is taking place. This can be exemplified even further if we take into consideration that the group is not performing very well (struggling through boss fights, group members dying consistently, and so forth). An assessment of the situation will have to be made and proper strategizing will have to take place in order to correct the problems.

When it was first released *Azjol-Nerub* was arguably one of the harder, if not hardest, instances for a random group to complete. The mechanics of the last boss, *Anub'arak*, made it difficult for random groups to coordinate effectively in their first attempt at defeating the boss. One skill in particular that the *Anub'arak* uses is called Pound. This ability would essentially kill any player who was not the tank in one hit. In order to dodge the ability, players had to use timing and positioning in order to not get hit by the skill. Usually, the first encounter with this skill would kill everyone in the group due to inexperience and understanding. Upon failure, the group would discuss possible solutions, think about the situation, and then come up with another plan. This

process would usually repeat itself until the group defeated the boss or decided they were incapable of handling this encounter. Regardless of the outcome, our fictional group had to employ collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving skills in order to progress or disband. Even if the group did not defeat *Anub'arak* and reap the benefits of the items he could possibly drop, the group members all leave the instance with a richer understanding of the instance and how to problem solve with a group.

When a group fails a task players tend to put the blame on anything but themselves, and usually do not realize any possible benefit they may have gained from failure. Individual skill certainly plays a role in a group's success when it comes to online games, but in group situations it is not everything. A well-coordinated group with solid communication can usually tackle a task much easier than a group who is relying on one person to do all of the work. By understanding the stages of group development, it can help players become better group members when moving forth in their online adventures.

While continuing research in group dynamics of online games, the idea of shared knowledge appears repeatedly. Further research into the concept of shared knowledge (how it comes about, why it is accepted, and where it can be found) is an avenue for further research. Random ad hoc groups seem to rely heavily on shared knowledge; therefore, a better understanding of the concept will lead to better group experiences. Deeper evaluation of leadership styles in online games brings forth research possibilities in how players establish credibility and earn respect in virtual worlds. There is an air of always wanting to be on top in online games – being in the best guild, having the most progressed character, and having hard to obtain items. These three factors can play a role in the amount of power a person has in online groups. The assumption of leadership qualities in those with lots of virtual “stuff” can have detrimental effects on a group's productivity. This is due to the ability of players to pay for (with ingame currency or real life currency) items, thus eliminating the

need for grouping and learning how to complete dungeons. The fundamental aspect of these types of games is to complete tasks in order to earn items, it would be interesting to shed light on why some members of the gaming community choose to pay for these items rather than earn them.

Group dynamics are a field that has been long studied, whether to increase productivity or just to better understand the type of communication occurs. In research conducted by IBM, it was found those workers who played MMORPGs had better team work and leadership skills than those who did not (Edery, 2008). Venture capitalists have also discussed using *WoW* as a platform for innovation and team building skills (Stewart, 2006). With businesses considering online games in this manner, further research in to their effectiveness is necessary. *World of Warcraft* is a fantastic platform to study how ad hoc groups work and the players communicate. People who normally would never work together in any other situation join groups to complete common goals. Regardless of the outcome, it is hard to find another platform with the staying power, popularity, and the ability for this type of communication to occur.

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# ***EUROPA UNIVERSALIS II:*** **Conquest, trading, diplomacy from the Middle Ages to Napoleon**

**Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen**

Serious Games Interactive  
Ravnsborggade 2-4, 2. Floor, 2200  
Copenhagen N, Denmark  
sen@seriousgames.dk

## **Basic data**

*Objective:* To play through history while experiencing different events and the variables that comes into play. Hereby getting a more dynamic and rich picture of how forces in history affect each other. Also the question of resources and strategy is important to acknowledge, when planning your actions in the game.

*Target audience:* Strategy gamers, historians, history students, and people with an interest in history.

*Playing time:* The game can be played for a very long time. The shortest realistic time for a meaningful scenario is around 2-3 hours. The Grand campaign stretches for days, perhaps even weeks depending on your playing style and the country you select.

*Number of players:* You can play single player or up to 8 players either on network or through the internet. All countries with no human player are computer controlled.

*Materials included:* One CD-ROM, one manual, scenario editor, and a world map of the different regions in the game.

*Equipment required:* Pentium 266, 64 MB ram, Graphic adapter (2 MB ram), Direct x compatible, Win95, 98, ME, 2000

*Price:* \$9.99

## **Introduction**

As I looked over my empire my sense of fulfilment grew. Instead of betting on costly European wars I had early on expanded my colonial empire. The strategy was a success – in the early 18th century Denmark controlled most of North America and most western and southern parts of Africa.

This review examines to what extent Europa Universalis is useful in an educational setting primarily in teaching history in secondary school. The game is from 2001 made by Peter Kullgard and Frederik Malmberg. It was one of the most celebrated strategy titles in 2001, winning several awards reflected by Gamespy in their review: “Europa Universalis II is possibly the best historical strategy game there is. That’s not an exaggeration.” Today the game still enjoys a huge following with active forums discussions of history related to the scenarios in the game, and the game in general.

Europa Universalis II makes it possible to experience history in a new way. It is not about the facts of history but instead you engage with the underlying historical dynamics from 1419-1820 to change or enact the course of history. As a player I can try and maintain Danish dominance around the Baltic Sea or uphold English supremacy in France. The player has many options, some much harder than others. It is hard to avoid the consequences of history, and to do so you will have to use your historical knowledge to prevent historical failures. The game has some major historical events that you will have to address; for example, the rebellion in England in 17th century, the 30-years

war, or Spain's bankruptcy due to the overflow of gold. Usually you can influence these situations and choose between different options, but the events will occur.

One example would be: "In 1628 the English Parliament passed the Petition of Rights. Under its terms the King could not levy any new taxes without the consent of Parliament. Furthermore soldiers could be billeted in private homes. Martial law could not be imposed in time of peace. Finally, the petition of Rights forbids the imprisonments of individuals without cause". You can then choose to sign the petition or reject it; in any case your decision will have long lasting consequences on the countries degree of centralization or their stability.

The attraction of the game lies in its ability to live up to the strategy genre's principles. You are able to build up a nation, plan a strategy for several years, and then suddenly see your plans shattered by unforeseen events that demand a new strategy. The game is capable of entertaining the player at several levels, going from a first layer of military conflict to the deeper layers of culture, religion, economy, and policy. The exploration of the game universe never quite seems to end, and you constantly experience new connections or options that makes your decisions more complex. You need to take more variables into the equation.

The game features more than 180 countries, and it is possible to play them all spanning the period from 1419 to 1820. Among these are many non-European countries such as Manchu, Shawnee, Zimbabwe and China. It is possible to design new countries, scenarios, and events. There are currently several examples of this online. One of the most interesting initiatives is the EEP project, where historically interested volunteers around the world add data and events to the game to make it richer with historical data.

Overall the game has different dimensions, which can be controlled by the player, and the game universe encompasses a broader part of history than is usually the case in stereotypical

historical strategy games that are usually centred around World War II. In the following section, the different areas are described along with some of the questions and variables related to each area. However, it is hard to present the relations between the different areas. For example, one of the most important overall variables is the stability of your country. The stability is altered by nearly any decision you make, and numerous events more or less under your control: waging war, changes in domestic policies, diplomatic moves, rebellions, bankruptcy, religious turmoil, and culture to name just a few.

### **The role of military**

The military conflicts in *Europa Universalis* are often dangerous and you can never quite be sure if they are worth the risk. When you decide to enter into a war this will have consequences for years to come, and you should (if possible) prepare for war years ahead. You need to consider a lot of other factors than merely the number of troops, like geography, attribution, leaders, technology, alliances, current wars, fortifications, and domestic policy. Often knowledge of historical events and the problems nations faced historically can be an advantage for your planning. For example, it is not a good idea for England to enter into the 30-years war (1618-1648) in the start of the 17th century as you are facing instability due to religious and political conflicts during this period. Likewise it is a very good idea for Denmark to quell Sweden in the start of the 17th century before the warrior king Gustav Adolph the Great claims the throne, and the Swedish battle machine gets into gear. Likewise, Russia should probably not expand with colonies in the New World in competition with other European powers, when they can expand east into Siberia. It should be stressed that historical awareness is not limited to just knowing what areas to explore and colonize.

## **The importance of the financial situation**

Your country's financial situation is extremely important in the game, and probably as important as your military acts in the long run. You need to watch out for inflation constantly as you raise armies, embark on war, and improve your infrastructure. You must avoid bankruptcy and be careful with the war taxes all of which is in a dialectic interaction with your country's stability.

When I tried to play Byzantium, I actually managed to fight off the Ottoman through loans, war taxes, and alliances, but my economy was completely shattered and it was close to impossible to recover.

The game distinguishes between income and expenses. Your expenses will explode when you are involved in war, and your income will decline due to ravaging armies. This will force you to 'print' money or take loans, which will result in inflation, and make it even harder for you next time to raise armies and improve infrastructure. The fixed expenses are kept relatively simple, consisting of maintenance of the military forces, interest from earlier loans, and a number of random historical related events. Your income comes from trade, goods, production, and gold mines, which all depends on the different regions in your country, your technology level, available resources and the world market in general. You can also get income from random events.

## **Political aspects of the game**

In Europa Universalis II, the player has more control of what direction a country politically will take: Will you encourage Mercantilism on your nation or bet on free trade? Will you centralize or decentralize the government? Can you still defend having serfs, or will you free your subjects? You can influence your domestic policies in 10 different areas and slowly form your country, although historical events will still make it hard to alter a country's course completely. Will you bet on stability or nurture innovation, and be leader in technology? Is your country to become ruler of the sea or will you bet on strength on land?

In the 15th century, north of the later powerful Russia, lies the small trading nation Novogorod, which I tried to keep independent through history starting in 1419. This was extremely hard. Although I won over Russia, Poland-Lithuanian, Prussia, Sweden, and other smaller nations, I couldn't maintain technology development up through the 18th century. This was due to the fact that I had failed to modernize my domestic policies and therefore had a conservative, old fashion nation, where development of new technology was slow and expensive.

Your politics are, of course, also influenced by your geographic and cultural composition. A country with a variety of cultures and opposing religions should not free the people too much – they will spring liberation movements if you give them too much freedom too fast. Prussia would be bad off trying to build a large navy, and France is not in a good position to change her state religion to Moslem.

### **Diplomacy the glue of the game**

Europa Universalis II gives you ample opportunity to use diplomacy to enhance your chances of success. Without a firm grasp of how to play different nations out against each other and maintain good relations with others, the game will become a lot harder. You must also use random diplomatic incidents to further your plans for expansion, and support your relations with other nations through gifts, marriage, trade agreements, vassalization, and alliances. It is through diplomacy that the really big changes are facilitated. For example, you can try to establish a strong alliance between Austria and Ottoman Empire, which would result in a interesting new scenario.

The game gives good insights into the importance of picking the right allies, and how important this can become in the long run. In the start of 17th century, Denmark and Sweden were fighting for supremacy in the Baltic Sea region. Historical Denmark was very close to getting an alliance with Russia through a royal marriage, however in the end the marriage failed on religious issues. Over the following years, Sweden slowly took over and became the

leader of the Baltic Sea region. In Europa Universalis II, it is relatively easy to enter into an alliance with Russia, and this has important implications for the war for supremacy in the Baltic Sea region.

This illustrates some of the problems with the game, as it fails to simulate on a small scale, and does not take into account that one-person 'stubbornness' could decide whether Denmark and Russia would enter an alliance. Here the game model is built up quite logically, and for both Denmark and Russia this is obviously a good idea. However this particular incident does not only show this problem with the game but also a potential learning opportunity if debriefing is used appropriately. The incident can serve as a good starting point for discussing different potential outcomes in the game world, and in history per se. This opens up for a discussion of historical dynamics and variables behind the divergence.

### **Problems with the game**

I have tried to describe some of the areas in Europa Universalis II to illustrate the richness and complexity of the simulation. It should be said that I have playtested this game for well over 3 weeks of full playing time, and have still not mastered it. However, as you progress some problems become apparent. One major problem is that the AI, although improved from the first Europa Universalis, is still lacking in quality and challenge. Using the multiplayer mode can solve this, but this requires that you are able to play with several players simultaneously. Even then, you will still have a lot of computer-controlled countries that act a bit strange. This can also make it hard to discuss the evolution of history in the game opposed to the real historical development. Sometimes the AI makes strange choices.

The game also seems to crash a little too often, although this has also been improved through patches. The yearly auto-save option makes it somewhat better, but could be expanded so that it can be set to once every 3rd month.

The complexity is initially a barrier, and can be quite overwhelming in comparison with other game genres. On the other hand, once you understand the in-game help and the basics of the game, you are able to play the game at some level. Slowly you appreciate new features of the game and take them into account in your decisions. So the way you play the game and understand the historical climate becomes still more multi-faceted. This is in line with learning theories on computer games that stress scaffolding, incremental learning, and probing (Gee, 2007). You are able to slowly expand your knowledge and constantly test your understanding. For example, the domestic policies demand a good overview of the game to realise the consequences. The complexity is also apparent in the messages that pop-up, which are initially quite overwhelming. It is possible for you to turn some of this off, and the game will remember your selections. Still, it is a problem for most players, and especially players with less experience.

Another problem is the pace of the game. Initially it can seem slow and with few events, however this is possible to regulate by turning up the speed, which is recommended when you play. You then pause the game when an event occurs. In this way the game plays a bit like SimCity, where you will also run out of money and patience if you have the speed on slow. As you learn more about the game you can speed the time up between events, or gather information in peaceful times that will improve your ability to make the right decisions, when events occur. The game has rich statistics on other nations with valuable information, and to stay on top of the diplomatic relations is quite a task.

Sometimes it also seems quite odd that nations outside of Europa become part of European alliances. For example, Creek is at war with Austria although they have absolutely no contact. Although the diplomatic system is more advanced than most strategy games, it is a problem that you can only be in one alliance and not enter into a non-aggression pact, or as France and England, make minor alliances with Native American nations. It also seems that the nations outside of Europa are far easier to play than

European nations mostly due to less competition and the possibility for expanding.

### **Educational considerations**

I believe that the game has educational potential, and I have conducted a two month-long history course, teaching with the game in a Danish high school involving 85 students and two teachers. This has served as the basis for my PhD (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2005).

Although on the surface the game seems very interesting from an educational perspective, there are several challenges. The game is one of the most advanced strategy games, and tries to borrow a lot from the simulation genre in that you can choose your own goals, and the underlying model is quite complex. This means that you need a lot of time to learn the game. This problem is to some degree relieved by the tutorials, but for the students without computer game experience it is a long road before they master the basics of the game, and can focus on the more educationally relevant historical questions.

The experiences with students aged 16-18 years suggest that the learning curve is very steep, and if you only play a couple of hours for 2 weeks you will not be able to master the game. This problem is aggravated because the students with game experience will play the game for fun outside of class, while the students with less game experience tend to play it less at home.

The lack of game skills is a problem, as the students will focus on learning the game universe, interface, and rules instead of taking the experience to a higher level. At this higher level, they should analyze, reflect, and discuss the events in the game. Furthermore, these events should be understood in relation to historical knowledge and discussed in relation to other historical resources to gain an awareness of the underlying variable and dynamics of history in this period.

Even though you set-up groups and time for these discussions, most students do not have the tools and knowledge to engage in these discussions. It also seems that the concept of history as 'not just facts' does not really fit into most students' concept of history. They feel frustrated and unsure of what they are expected to do with the game, and what the purpose is. This is a trend that has become more apparent for history teachers over the years

Still, in my opinion Europa Universalis II is an interesting game for educational purposes and offers a rich game-based environment where you can explore the dynamics of history. However, it seems that the game would work best in a condensed one week theme-based cross-disciplinary teaching setting, where you have time to play the game for longer periods of time than 47 minutes (one lesson in Danish schools).

You may not be able to change the history books, but you will be get an entirely new world map when you finish the game. A map that you have shaped through wars, diplomacy, trade, and exploration over several centuries. This is history in action at it finest.

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# Deus Ex Ludos: Representation, Agency, and Ethics in *Deus Ex: Invisible War*

**Joseph Hogle**

University of Pittsburgh  
233 Romeo Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15213  
[jih53@pitt.edu](mailto:jih53@pitt.edu)

## **Do players have agency?**

According to Alec Charles (2009), videogames offer a “fictive agency”: they purport to be places where players have free will, but they are not actually such places at all. This is because every choice available to videogame players is determined by code, and the code is written in advance by developers. The game world is thus limited, or determined. Players can *react* to this determined world, but they cannot *act* in it. Charles calls this “functional reactivity”: players respond to the determination of the game in order to serve the game’s determinations. So gameplay is not self-determination (i.e., agency), but faux-determination, a facsimile of agency.

Charles finds this problematic because games present themselves as places where players have *real* agency. Illusory self-determination—players assuming they have total freedom of choice when in fact their choices are restricted—sneakily robs players of their real-life self-determination. Players are “subsumed to the game’s constructed subject.” They are duped into believing that “their participation represents a form of activity, a mode of agency, [when] they are, in effect (and in consequence), mere puppets of the text”. In seeing their game-agency as true agency, players lose their ability to really challenge the world of the game. They have no room for

interpretation or meaning-creation. By *pretending* to give players some freedom of choice, videogames actually *prevent* players from having real autonomy.

To counter Charles's claims, let us first look at how the game world is structured in comparison to the real world. The game world has laws, much like the real world, although such laws are often simpler than their real world counterparts. It is these laws that make game-agency fictive: only a finite set of actions are recognizable to the game, which means that players' choices are narrowly delineated and their agency undermined. To illustrate this, imagine I am playing a simple videogame as a character who can throw a ball. In both the game and the real world, I can throw the ball in the air. In both the game world and real world, the ball then falls to the ground. But in the game world I can only throw the ball straight up or straight down. In the real world I can throw the ball in any direction. There are boundaries to what I can do in the game world, boundaries put there by the game's developers. Such boundaries are lawful restrictions, separate from those in the real world and discoverable through experimentation.

Thus, what can be done in a game is restricted. A game world has its own immutable mechanics. Its laws exist because there is a code—a programmatic structure—made by developers, and this code allows or does not allow for certain actions. The game world is, in effect, purely determinate. But does this mean that *players' actions* are purely determinate? Return to the example of the ball-throwing game. A videogame version of Laplace's demon—one that can see every line of code, the determinate structure of the game—is watching me play. Can the demon predict what will happen at every point in the game while I play it? The answer is no. At each instance in the game where there is more than one possibility—where players can push either one button or another, where I can throw the ball up or down—the demon only has access to the determinate world of the code. The demon does not have access to me, the player. I am an indeterminate influence on the world of the game. In fact, determination in the game *hinges* on an agent external to the game's programmatic structure: the player. That's what gameplay *is*.

So we see that in games, interactivity—i.e., the significance of the player's agency in the game—is not illusory. While all internal parts of the game are determinate, those parts cannot function independent of players' input, and players are *external* to

the game. They are not determined by it, and even though the game can limit their choices, it cannot make their choices for them or predict their choices with any kind of certainty. This is not a mere *sense* of agency. It is *real* agency, even if it is structured by a world whose rules are different from the real one.

Players of videogames are generally aware of this system of restricted choice and consequence. Any person who has played with a friend might have heard the friend ask “*Does the game let you do X?*” or “*What happens if you do Y?*” or “*Why can’t I do Z?*” Such questions acknowledge the restrictive nature of a game’s laws. Players experiment with game worlds to test their boundaries. This experimentation reveals that players *know* they are in a world of restrictions that do not mirror those of the non-virtual. Players have some agency, but are not fooled into thinking they have the same *sort* of agency in the game world that they have in the real world, as Charles would have it.

In many ways, agency in videogames mirrors how theorists of intelligent design see agency in the real world: an all-powerful creator makes a universe with particular restrictions, laws, functions, and meanings. In this universe, individuals with free will act. Such individuals make decisions and the consequences of those decisions are determined by the laws of the universe, which were determined by the creator and in which the creator does not intervene. The individuals are indeterminate actors within a determinate, intentional system.

The videogame, too, is an intentional system, one made by game developers. As I have shown, an intentional structure of restrictions (determined by other humans, not an all-powerful creator) is the defining difference between game agency and what we see as real agency. Charles would have us believe that this difference makes videogames mendacious, or at least deceptive, but players experiment within videogames precisely because they are aware that videogames limit their agency. Hence, rather than being deceptive, might the intentional structure of videogames be an appeal to creativity?

What I mean is this: through a determined system of restrictions, choices, and consequences, skilled developers can challenge a player ideologically, or otherwise prompt self-reflection. Videogames can use their coded consequences to represent concepts in new or meaningful ways. They can make claims about the world which are not closed off to interpretation or challenge from players. Indeed, the finitude of choices in games can give rise to moral frustration and self-evaluation—in

other words, to meaning-creation. In the interest of explaining these things, I will examine how *Deus Ex: Invisible War* (*DX:IW*) accomplishes them.

## Core, shell, and ethical practice

To make my analysis of *Deus Ex: Invisible War* as lucid as possible, I will hold off on it for a little longer and talk about the construction of video games in general. King and Krzywinska write, “games have their own dimensions, distinct from those of other media ... but games are also social-cultural products, involved in the broad processes through which ideas are circulated ... [games] often draw upon or produce material that has social, cultural, or ideological resonances ... they can be understood as reinforcing, negating or challenging meanings generated elsewhere in society” (King and Krzywinska, 2006, 169). This is exactly what *DX:IW* does: challenge players’ received or inculcated meanings.

Frans Mayra’s (2008) concepts of “core” and “shell” will help us understand the *how* of this challenge. A game’s core is the coded set of laws/restrictions discussed above. The game’s shell is its “representation and sign system,” i.e., its images, sounds, words, characters, plot, and so on. Without the core, the game probably does not exist *per se*; at least, it does not work. Without the shell, the game cannot communicate. I will look at parts of both *DX:IW*’s core (its players’ agency) and *DX:IW*’s shell (its representation of political structures) to show how it prompts meaning-creation.

To be specific, I will deal with *ethical* meaning. The serious application of ethical frameworks to videogames is fairly new. Sicart (2005) looks at how ethical community-practices within a game world change based on a game’s rules. Shulke makes a case for *Fallout 3* as a game that excels at moral teaching. Particularly helpful are Simkins and Steinkuehler (2008): they develop a compelling case for why ethical choices in games matter, as well as a useful framework for RPG features that drive critical ethical reasoning.

All these studies place experience and practice at the center of ethical learning. Drawing from thinkers like Aristotle and Dewey, they assert that just thinking about ethical assertions or dilemmas is not the only, or even the best, way to cultivate one’s sense of ethics. It helps if one can make *decisions* that have

*consequences*. To put it another way, ethical decision-making must be *practiced* in a variety of scenarios if one's ethical reasoning (1) is to mature.

Videogames allow for such practice. Because of their design mechanics—e.g., their ability to situate players' agency in an imaginary narrative context—they can demand that players experiment with ethical decision-making. Moreover, they can connect players' decisions with dramatic consequences. To show this process of ethical cultivation at work, I will give a detailed account of an ethical dilemma players face at the end of *DX:IW*. To my knowledge, a rigorous ethical analysis has never been applied to any specific part of the game.

First, for the sake of clarity, I will provide a brief expository account of the diegetic world—the narrative, representations, and logics—of *DX:IW*.

## **Deus Ex: Invisible War**

*Deus Ex: Invisible War*, the sequel to *Deus Ex*, is a science fiction game set at an unknown point in the future. The world of *DX:IW* is suffering economic depression and widespread social upheaval. Technology plays a pivotal role, especially insofar as it allows people to make drastic alterations to their bodies. Known as “biomods,” these alterations can give a person superhuman abilities, e.g., incredible reflexes, strength, vision, or intelligence.

The same technology that gives us biomods can also be used for acts of violence: the game opens with a nano-technological terrorist attack that destroys Chicago, and later, a corporation spreads a lethal nanite virus. Biotechnological violence is done with weapons too small to see—hence the game's title. As one character remarks, “We don't need cities or armies. We have the cells of human bodies. An invisible weapon, for an invisible war” (Ion Storm, 2003). Finally and perhaps most importantly, biomodification increases the gap between rich and poor. The wealthy can afford biomods to extend their lives and give themselves fantastic attributes. The poor do not have this luxury.

*DX:IW* is a first-person role-playing game, with “Alex D.” being the role. Alex is heavily biomodified and has been trained as an anti-terrorist agent. To progress in the game, players must, as Alex, accomplish a number of objectives. They can do so

through stealth, dialogue, espionage, combat, or a mixture of all four—notably, killing is never *required*.

The player is routinely presented with multiple, mutually exclusive objectives and forced to choose one. For example, she might have one objective that requires her kill a scientist, and another that requires her to protect that scientist. Her decision affects the options available to them in later stages. While interesting, these branching decision points make it all but impossible to provide a thorough summary of the plot: there are too many twists, turns, and alternatives. In light of this, and since my claims do not rest on minute plot points, I'll choose brevity and simplicity over summarization. The skeletal background I've provided is enough to understand my next section, a description of political representations in *DX:IW*.

## Political representations

If the shell of a videogame is its representations, or diegetic elements, then political organizations make up the most important part of *Deus Ex: Invisible War's* shell. There are four major political organizations in *DX:IW*: ApostleCorps, the Illuminati, the Knights Templar, and the Omar. These organizations define the player's functional objectives; i.e., they give the player assignments. They also structure the narrative world of the game—not only the main story, but also the marginal but persistent backdrop against which events unfold.

Players find themselves aligned—by accident or design—with one of the four organizations by the time the game ends. Since these organizations are the backbone of the game's diegesis and, thus, determine its ethical landscape, we cannot evaluate the game's creation of ethical meaning unless we know something about each organization's ideology and aims. To this end, we will look at some selections of dialogue (2).

*ApostleCorps*. This is the most philosophically sophisticated of the four organizations. Its goals are twofold: to create a “pure” democracy and to create a posthuman civilization in which ability—i.e., the capacity for physical or intellectual problem-solving—is a universal public resource.

**Alex D:** What would this "pure democracy" look like?

**JC Denton:** The Helios AI has the processing power to handle all governmental functions worldwide, legislative, executive, and judicial. Once every mind has been enhanced and can merge with the AI, attitudes toward major legislation can be processed on a daily or even more frequent basis.

**Alex D:** You want everyone to...meld themselves together into one huge AI construct?

**JC Denton:** Helios will communicate, not assimilate. Life will go on as usual.

**Alex D:** Helios is starting to sound like an enlightened despot.

**JC Denton:** All governments have power. The benefit of giving this power to a synthetic intellect is that human affairs would no longer need to be ruled by generalities. Helios will have a deep understanding of every person's life and opinions...de Tocqueville noted that an all-knowing mind—the mind of God, as he conceived it—would have no need for general ideas. It would understand every individual in detail and at a glance. Incomplete applications of law or justice would be impossible for such a mind.

**Alex D:** So you see yourself as a god?

**JC Denton:** I want human affairs to be driven by wisdom. Finding the correct recipe for wisdom has been my project these long years under the ice.

**Alex D:** You seem to think you've succeeded.

**JC Denton:** Wisdom must first be human. You must start with what a human sees and feels. But wisdom must also be knowledgeable, logical, and fair to billions of other beings.

In the interest of creating a pure democracy, an AI construct would be given access to every person's mind. The construct would acquire this access through universal biomodifications, which would be installed in all people at once and become part of

the human chromosome. The universalization of ability would be a natural consequence of this process.

**Paul Denton:** If you want to even out the social order, you have to change the nature of power itself. Right? And what creates power? Wealth, physical strength, legislation—maybe—but none of those is the root principle of power....ability is the ideal that drives the modern state. It's a synonym for one's worth, one's social reach, one's "election," in the Biblical sense, and it's the ideal that needs to be changed if people are to begin living as equals.

**Alex D:** And you think you can equalize humanity with biomodification?

**Paul Denton:** The commodification of ability—tuition, of course, but, increasingly, genetic treatments, cybernetic protocols, now biomods—has had the side effect of creating a self-perpetuating aristocracy in all advanced societies. When ability becomes a public resource, what will distinguish people will be what they do with it. Intention. Dedication. Integrity. The qualities we would choose as the bedrock of the social order.

Universalizing ability entails a sort of physicalization of Martha Nussbaum's "capabilities approach". For Nussbaum (2007), a government's job should be to ensure that all individuals have the capability to possess certain basic characteristics that ensure dignity and quality of life. These include things like bodily health and bodily integrity, as well as control over one's environment/senses/imagination. ApostleCorps' plan guarantees, or seems to guarantee, those capabilities for everyone. According to them, all people will start life "truly equal in both body and mind...lucid, knowledgable, and emotionally sound" (1).

*The Knights Templar.* The Knights Templar are religious fundamentalists. They preach the value of "natural" human biology, and cast biotechnology/biomodification as a threat to humanity.

**Templar Knight:** Human society is now so destructive that organic life itself is an endangered species. Remember the Templar message. The more you look at the world, the more truthful my words will seem...the individual worker—careerist, let's say—seldom understands how his small labor contributes to human history. Seemingly innocuous innovations in cell biology, nanotechnology, and computer science add up to a teeming substrate of new life. But it isn't life. It's death. It seeks to devour its clumsy, organic creators.

**Alex D:** My biomods don't change who I am. They're tools—I use them to complete certain tasks.

**Templar Knight:** But the tasks grow in strangeness and complexity. The demands of others corrupt you. All because you allow yourself to be something other than human.

Machines, by virtue of slowly replacing the “natural” organic structure of the human being, are also replacing humanity. This ideological stance is not especially hard to unravel: it is bigotry dressed up in a mythologized account of human biological characteristics. It is founded on the sanctity of some “natural” state or value. Appropriately, the Templars are the closest thing to an outright enemy in *DX:IW*. They commit acts of terrorism to try and prevent the spread of biomodification. Their radicalism pits them against every other organization in the game. By the end, the Templars have a plan to eliminate all biomodifications without harming the organism that's been modified (the story does allow for gray areas). Since the opponents of the Templars rely heavily on their biomods, this would allow the Templars to seize control.

*The Illuminati.* The Illuminati are an aristocratic organization. They attempt to bring the world out of its economic depression and social collapse through behind-the-scenes maneuvering. For example, two pseudo-factions at the beginning of the game appear to be against one another: The Order and the World Trade Organization. These pseudo-factions give the player conflicting objectives. Later it is revealed that both are actually run by the Illuminati. The Illuminati use these groups (and the struggle between them) as a means for global good. A

conversation with one of the Illuminati leaders reveals their intent and reasoning:

**Nicolette:** We'll always lead the people, though they'll never know our names. Our sacred goal, the elevation of humankind, can only be accomplished in secrecy. We will provide civilization with only the best leadership...

**Alex D:** Any last-minute advice?

**Nicolette:** Yes—I worry that you still perceive the Illuminati as a conspiracy. The organization does have some image problems, I suppose. As you know, the Illuminati have imperceptibly guided civilization for centuries. How? Leadership. We elevate the capable into positions of authority, where they can do the most good for everyone. JC [Apostlecorps] and Saman [The Knights Templar] both want to level the social order, either by giving biomods to everyone or no one. It's the same either way—the end of true leadership and a descent into chaos.

**Alex D:** What do you propose instead?

**Nicolette:** Without extraordinary individuals, civilization will founder. Total homogeneity—now THAT'S unnatural. That's what we have to resist at all cost.

**Alex D:** So the Illuminati wants to maintain disparity?

**Nicolette:** Not disparity, but difference, and the well-managed specialization it makes possible. Some people just aren't leaders and shouldn't be granted great powers. The Illuminati want to ensure that humankind will always have a select few—like you, Alex—to inspire the rest.

The Illuminati think that leveling the playing field will result in chaos. They claim that a hierarchy in which a few leaders make decisions for all others is the only viable social model. It is by refining this structure that humanity can be bettered.

*The Omar.* The Omar seem to have no specific stake in the direction society takes. Players encounter them as traders of black-market goods. They value nothing but their own physical/mental enhancement. Thanks to extensive

biomodification, the Omar are suited to survive in almost any environment. They have all merged into a collective consciousness by replacing parts of their brains with a wireless connected interface. Their ideological commitment is to radical posthumanity; they feel the other organizations adhere to outdated ideas of human potential, for in their view, the word “human” is hardly applicable to what technology allows us to *become*. The Omar embrace a type of Darwinist fundamentalism: the only real purpose in the world is fitness and mastery.

## Representation and genre

These political structures fit nicely into a reading of *DX:IW* as a science fiction text. The game is faithful to many of the characteristics that define the genre. It uses a fictional *novum*—in this case, a future defined by biomodification—to establish cognitive estrangement. That is, the game world is both relatable and plausible, because its representations of reality correlate to the actual world; yet at the same time, the game world is unfamiliar, because even though its representations involve plausible innovations and advancements, they are not part of our lives. So we recognize the subject but are also removed from it. This allows us to see the game’s representations from a critical distance and to reflect on reality in new ways. It allows the text to work as a “diagnosis, a call to understanding and action, and—most important—a mapping of possible alternatives” (Suvin, 1972). Thus, representation in *DX:IW* serves the same function as in science fiction literature. It prompts reflection and critical thought, which alone is enough to create ethical meaning.

## Consequences and ethics

That said, I am not interested in dealing only with the shell of *Deus Ex: Invisible War*. Rather, I am arguing that its elemental design, or core, is also conducive to the creation of ethical meaning. Specifically, I want to look at the mechanism of player agency, which makes the game not just an opportunity for ethical reflection, but an *arena* in which ethical decision-making is *practiced*.

There can't be ethical decision-making without consequences, so it only makes sense to describe the consequences of aligning with *DX:IW*'s factions. I find *DX:IW* particularly sophisticated in this regard. Instead of communicating ethical consequences through pedantic mechanics like morality points, rewards, or sliders (see *Fallout 3*, *Fable*, *Knights of the Old Republic*), *DX:IW* embeds ethics in its narrative, or diegetic representations. It does not use some metric to tell players which actions are right and which are wrong, but requires players to critically evaluate what they do. In keeping with this spirit of critical self-evaluation, I will now stop referring to third-person "players" and make my own (first-person) experience of gameplay an explicit part of my analysis (spoiler alert: the bulk of this analysis concerns the final moments of the game).

Remember that the political organizations listed above are not part of a background narrative, but actually represent dense webs of choices that affect how the game's plot unfolds. Remember also my critique of Charles: as a player, I must act within the determinate system of the game. Thus, I cannot choose *not* to choose between the factions unless I stop playing entirely. I have to align myself with one, and that alignment comes with consequences. But this determinacy does not foreclose agency. As we've seen, the game's determinate structure is rich with multivalent meanings, many of which are mutually exclusive. In order to advance in the game, I must weigh the in-game characters' ideologies against one another and act accordingly. The game gives me a limited number of actions to take, but it cannot force me to choose one in particular. All it can do is try to *persuade* me; I myself will decide what to do with the choices given me, and if I decide to do what seems most ethical, then this surely is an exercise of agency. After all, my decision causes the game to progress in one way rather than another.

Just as it would take too long to summarize the game's entire plot, it would also take too long to describe every possible ending, or ultimate consequence, in detail. I will only go into some, and in doing so, I will describe what went through my head as I played. I'll do this because playing games is often a kind of performance, and one of the keys to understanding such performance is the thought process of the performer (Mayra, 2008).

The game's ending invariably occurs on Liberty Island. When I reach it, the leaders of three of the four factions ask me to fulfill certain tasks—e.g., activating a machine, killing another

faction's leader—in service of their ideological aims (3). Absent from the factions giving orders are the Omar: as in the rest of the game, they seem to have little interest in what happens to the rest of the world.

Having to decide between the factions brings me to a standstill. My initial impulse is to endorse ApostleCorps. The Illuminati are manipulators; it seems that at best, they will maintain the status quo. The Knights Templar are more or less odious, so they're out. ApostleCorps is the most ethically persuasive of the factions, being interested in fixing the problems of humanity at their source.

Nevertheless, something about ApostleCorps seems amiss. Though I've decided to take it on faith that humanity will not become slave to a godlike artificial intelligence, it seems wrong to make biomodification compulsory (as would be the case if it were universalized the way ApostleCorps wants). The only way the plan can work is if *all* people are biomodified, even those who don't want to be. Achieving a "pure democracy" by stripping people of their bodily autonomy strikes me as...unjust, to put it lightly.

None of my choices is palatable. So what happens next? I come upon a non-player character in the game who proposes yet another path. Named Leo Jankowski, this character was introduced as a friend earlier in the storyline. Although he briefly sided with the Omar, he explains that he rejected their organization once they asked him to become part of their hive mind.

"It doesn't take a genius to see they all want one thing," he says, referring to all the organizations (not just the Omar). "To force their system on the rest of us. The world is doing just fine without a supreme leader." This loosely echoes my own sentiments: all of the factions want to unjustly compel people into adopting their political structure. While I don't agree with Leo that the world is doing just fine, I also don't see compulsion as an acceptable solution.

I decide to take Leo's way out. I kill the leaders of all three factions and destroy the machine that would allow them to enforce their systems on a global scale.

Afterward, a cutscene plays. I see a red wasteland: ruins and desert. As the camera pans, I hear a voiceover.

After the Great Collapse only the mighty survived.  
Two centuries of war saw the rise and fall of many

empires. It was the age of heroes. The battle fired crucible of all subsequent history. In the end the Earth was no longer green. Nothing survived on its surface other than a few embers of human kind. But from this crucible emerged masterworks of evolution.

At the line “masterworks of human evolution,” the camera cuts to the face of an Omar. The Omar has nothing we’d recognize as skin. Its face is either permanently behind a gas mask or indistinguishable from one (see Figure 1).

They were fit not just for the new Earth, but for the most barren corners of Creation. The glory of humanity would hence forward stretch on through time and space to the vanishing point of Eternity.

As the narrator says “glory of humanity,” the camera cuts to the face of a dead human, with the Omar walking away from the camera. As the image fades out, a quote appears:

“Let us reply to ambition that it is she herself  
that gives us a taste for solitude.”  
– Montaigne

The narration is ironic when juxtaposed with the images. Nothing about the Omar appears to be human; indeed, an obsession with biological fitness, progression for progression’s sake, has led the Omar to excise all traces of the frailty we see as unavoidable, if not constitutive, aspects of our selves. It’s true that by killing the leaders of the three human factions I destroyed the status quo, but this did not lead to the betterment of humanity. On the contrary, it led to an environment in which nothing we consider human could possibly survive.

In this case, I put my ethical reasoning into practice and was met with an unwelcome consequence. I have interpreted this consequence in a particular way—namely, as unsatisfying. I acknowledge that someone else, someone with different ethical sensibilities, might find the consequence completely satisfying. I also acknowledge that this consequence is provided by the

game, which, as noted, is a determined system. In real life it could have been otherwise. We can't say for sure. Regardless, I am left with the sense that I made the wrong choice. I am prompted to reevaluate my initial ethical reasoning.

As I experiment with the game, I find the other endings equally unsatisfying. The narrations are always optimistic and the onscreen images always convey a sense of manifest, hopeless injustice. The Knights Templar usher in an age of total religious intolerance: the only images in their final cutscene are bodies hanging from church rafters. The Illuminati impose an age of peace, but it is also an age of oppression, inequality, and constant surveillance. Particularly disheartening is the ApostleCorps ending. For most of the game, ApostleCorps' reasoning has been sophisticated and somewhat inspiring. Their cutscene is different:

A crowd of people dressed in white stand on Liberty Island. Their foreheads are all aglow, presumably from some type of biomod; their necks are craned backward, as if they were in rapture (see Figure 2). The camera pans upward and I see that the Statue of Liberty has been replaced with a holographic facsimile. I hear a voiceover from the AI construct (the one supposed to universalize capability).

Helios will speak. Year of our Union, 125. Our consensus remains clear. Yes, we will prolong a second century of peace. Economical automation is complete. Our research will now encompass other frontiers. Yes, this is the consensus we have created. Our unity will soon be absolute. The remaining boundaries are vanishing. Yes, share your mind with everyone. Open yourself. Your needs are the needs of all. Let us understand and be transformed. Yes, Transform each other and transform yourselves. The only frontier that has ever existed is the self. Helios has spoken.

This voiceover is delivered in an uninflected, robotic tone. The people are motionless. Discordant music plays. The image fades to be replaced by a quote:

It really is of importance, what men do, but also what manner of men are that do it. Among the works of man... the first importance surely is man himself. —John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*

Again, the voiceover is somewhat hopeful, but it is set against an unsettling image and paired with unsettling sounds. The people in the crowd appear to be passive and uniform. A posthuman society *has* been created, but it too is unsatisfying. Given the cutscene’s invocation of science fiction tropes, we can reasonably assume that poverty and violence have been eliminated for the price of passion and individuality. Our sense is that this “consensus” is dystopian, that the self has been not so much explored as entombed. In this light, the Mill quote is ironic. It is a reminder that the work of humanity—the AI construct—has become more important than humanity itself. It has replaced the human rather than enhanced it.

All the game’s endings are open to challenge and interpretation. I find each one ethically frustrating. Perhaps this is the most sophisticated aspect of *DX:IW*: it leaves players—some players, and I would wager the majority of players—wanting something else. It leaves players with a sense of discomfort rather than triumph. I don’t want *any* of the endings I’m given, and I am pushed to consider how a different ending might come to be.

This is the very substance of meaning-creation: the game brings me face to face with the limitations and uncertainties of ethical reasoning. It is precisely the finite, determinate nature of the game—a nature that permits me to *act*, but only in certain ways—that prompts my frustration and ethical reflection; that is, my meaning-creation.

## Deus Ex Ludos

This meaning-creation is not superficial or trivial. The game does not just allow for ethical reasoning and ethical practice: it encourages them, almost to the point of requiring them for progression (4). It gives players more than just ethical dilemmas. It gives them a *simulation* in which they can act on those dilemmas. In making this argument, I have advanced three claims:

1. Games are intentional, restricted systems in which players nonetheless have agency.
2. It is their very determinacy that allows games to inspire meaning-creation in players.

3. *Deus Ex: Invisible War* is a game that prompts meaning-creation by demanding ethical practice; the player engages in and acts on moral dilemmas, which encourages critical ethical reasoning.

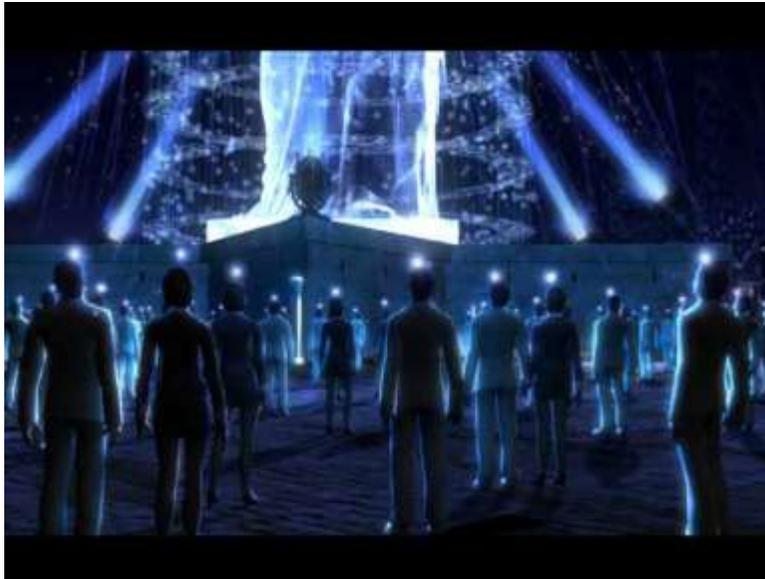
Not all, or even most, games inspire such meaning-creation, which is perfectly fine. Ethical practice or meaning-making should not be the only criterion by which we judge games; there are many games worth treasuring for their sheer excitement, or for how they encourage relationships with other players, or for how they allow players to escape into a story. Moreover, we need not demote non-game media just because games have the ability to encourage ethical practice. Other media—like literature, film, and art—also encourage meaning-making, though their mechanics may be different. The point of analyzing *Deus Ex: Invisible War* has simply been to show one way in which games, through their combination of determinacy and agency, can prompt us to engage critically with our ethical sensibilities. Especially when games operate as a rich, multivalent texts (e.g., through carefully realized narrative elements), their structured interactivity can inspire the sort of ethical frustration that leads to meaning-creation and affirms, rather than denies, our agency as human beings.

Figure 1



Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:EndOmar.jpg>

Figure 2



Source:

<http://www.visualwalkthroughs.com/deusexinvisiblewar/apostlecorp/apostlecorp.html>

## Endnotes

(1) “Rather than beginning by telling learners what to believe, one may begin by finding ways to tap into those activities where the learners are ‘animated by a sympathetic and dignified regard for the sentiment of others’ (Dewey, 1916/2001, p. 361)—that is, to identify and encourage empathy. Any injunction to be empathic is likely to be hollow if it does not coincide with experiences, however. Therefore, it is in direct experience that we should look for opportunities for learning to appreciate others. By developing a growing appreciation and understanding for other people’s moral context, we hone the skills that underlie critical ethical practice.” (Shulke, 2009)

“According to Aristotelian virtue ethics, morality is not a matter of learning universal laws. It is learning how to be good by strengthening one’s practical wisdom to the point that it is capable of resolving moral dilemmas as they arise. Practical wisdom is essential even for those who believe in a moral code as it is the skill that allows one to recognize when to apply a particular rule.” (Simkins, 2008)

(2) Dialogue in *DX:IW* favors the Socratic: a non-player character will give reasons for completing a certain objective, and Alex D. (whom players control) will challenge the reasons or ask for an explanation. Players are reminded that the ideas in the game come from humans, not some omniscient entity that hands out fiat. Thus, the structure of the dialogue is itself a nod to traditional modes of ethical reasoning.

(3) The number of vying factions varies. For example, if the player has killed the leader of the Illuminati earlier in the game, then she will not receive any goal-directed orders from the Illuminati. For simplicity’s sake I have left such complexities out of this particular analysis.

(4) N.B. These things are dependent on the level of immersion and investment, or affect, the game gives the player. For further reading, see Simkins and Steinkuehler (Simkins, 2008)

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# Playing as a Woman as a Woman as if a Man

**Gabriela T. Richard**

New York University  
82 Washington Square East, 6<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10003  
gabriela@nyu.edu

## Introduction

It's a chilly weekend day, the kind of day I love because I can rationalize not doing anything I know I should be doing, like going to the gym or running errands; instead, it's the perfect day to pop out of bed, run to the Xbox 360 and play one of my favorite RPG<sup>1</sup> titles, or finally get to one of the single-player campaigns I glossed over in favor of competitive multiplayer. While I am a scholar during my work hours, I am also a female competitive online gamer in a female-oriented clan during my leisurely weekday hours where I spend time playing online team-oriented competitive games. However, the weekends and, especially, long holiday breaks, are reserved for lone immersion in fantasylands, particularly those that allow me to play as my personified self in relation to that world.

This pastime can be traced back to my childhood years when I got my first Nintendo game system and spent countless hours playing through, and replaying, *Zelda II: the Adventure of Link*. I had figured out that if I spent hours running around in the grass and fighting bits and bots, I could overpower my character enough to take down most of the bosses with little effort. However, it was later that I discovered the original *Legend of Zelda*, and other fascinating RPGs, like *Final Fantasy* and

*Dragon Warrior*, which extended my imagination, and within which I could spend countless hours solving puzzles, talking to non-playable characters and ultimately slaying enemies in order to save the world... and the princess.

Saving the princess was always an interesting conundrum for me: on the one hand, growing up with feminist-leaning parents made me acutely aware of the problematic stance this took on, but, on the other hand, classic fantasy books, 1980s movies and other media almost made it seem like the natural order of fantasy-themed fiction. While I played my fair share of action adventure games, and later competitive fighting games in arcades, it was always the immersion of the RPG that encouraged my exploration and creativity, and, ultimately, allowed me to transcend reality, in a pleasurable way, at least for a little while. In the early days of gaming, whether it was *Dragon's Lair* in the arcade or *Final Fantasy* at home, playing in a man's narrative was an explicit part of the experience, and playing a man's narrative as a girl felt revolutionary. Not only was I playing through as a girl, but I was making it my own, and defying what others thought I should play, or should be interested in. In essence, exceptionalism was my symbolic defiance of static gender norms. And this sense of defiance was generational: even though I was one of the only girls I knew who played video games frequently and took pleasure in invading boy's spaces, like the arcade and the comic book store, popular expression encouraged this sense of tomboyish reclamation. In particular, the riot grrrl movement was in full swing in the late-80s and early 90s, and it was incredibly common to see women and girls finding empowerment through the rejection of gender norms and the redefinition of gender-based expression. I came to love the empowerment that video games, particularly RPGs, gave me, and spending an afternoon in an open world where I could express that empowerment became part of my escape from the gendered expectations constantly imposed upon me.

These days, that escapism has been primarily reserved for Bethesda<sup>2</sup> RPG titles, like *Fallout 3*, *Fallout New Vegas* or *Skyrim*. For whatever reason, Bethesda has figured out how to recapture the kind of giddy enthusiasm I once reserved for the Christmas mornings of childhood. While I have never quite figured out why journeying through an open wasteland or mythic Nordic countryside has captured my imagination like no other, Bethesda's recent titles have managed to make me spend hours tirelessly exploring, pursuing, and reflecting on who I am in relation to the fantasy world, my character and my real life presence, particularly through explicit and ambiguous moral choices. Maybe this is also precisely why I sometimes feel my fantasy bubble burst when I encounter the popular artifacts around these games: after spending 200+ hours as Rogue, or Myst, or Kitanya (the names I gave each of my characters in *Fallout 3*, *Fallout New Vegas* and *Skyrim*, respectively) journeying through the wasteland or the countryside with my companions (who I carefully protected and made sure had the appropriate amount of stimpacks or weapons), I would spiral back into the real world when I looked at the back cover of my game case, or experienced a game sequence that didn't quite fit my character, or looked up artwork online, or even walked into a GameStop and saw the character I was supposed to be playing in the way "he" was conceived by whatever powers that be. It is during these moments that I become aware of my "womanness" playing a story about a man as a woman.

### **Playing In the Backdrop of the Vault Dweller, the Courier and the Dragonborn**

To be fair, most of the newer Bethesda RPG titles have probably offered one of the most authentic experiences of playing as the gender or race of your choice to date, when compared to most games that let you vary those characteristics in your game experience (which I will discuss in more depth later). *Fallout 3* and *Fallout New Vegas* are set in a post-apocalyptic retro-future

American world resulting from a nuclear holocaust that happened in an alternate 2077. Even though *Fallout 3* is a continuation of a classic PC post-apocalyptic RPG, it stands out as an almost complete reimagining of the original series, and can be thought of as the first in a new series<sup>3</sup>. Both games have 1950s-era architecture, design, nostalgia and anti-communist themes, symbolizing references to *A Boy and His Dog*<sup>4</sup> and providing the backdrop of an alternate futuristic world that branched off from our actual US history circa 1950-60s. Within this world, you can freely roam and explore, and you can choose most of your characteristics down to the detail, including your sex, race/ethnicity, eye color, skin color, hairstyle and color, as well as your personality attributes.

*Fallout 3* gives you the unique perspective of experiencing your own birth in a vault<sup>5</sup> (and your mother's subsequent death during birth), going through your toddler years (where you choose your S.P.E.C.I.A.L. attributes<sup>6</sup> from a child's book), and experiencing your childhood and teenage years, all while bonding with your widowed, scientist father, and fellow vault dwellers. Your early interactions with your father and fellow vault dwellers, as well as being immersed in the first person perspective and experience of your early years, helps to weave you into the story of the person you will become and why (though how you become morally good, evil or neutral in relation to this narrative is up to you and your game choices). In essence, you can make an equally skilled young or old, Black, White, Asian or Hispanic, male or female character.

*Fallout New Vegas* allows for the same level of character customization but without a significant back-story (and in many ways allows you to assume you are continuing where the original vault dweller of *Fallout 3* left off). The game begins with you, a mail courier, being shot in the head by a 1940s or 50s-era looking gangster named Benny in the future Las Vegas Mojave Wasteland desert. You are saved by a mysterious robot and healed by a doctor, where you are able to reestablish your traits (by assigning your S.P.E.C.I.A.L. attributes in his office). While

you do not have early memories or attachments to non-playable characters (NPCs)<sup>7</sup> to ground your morality, like in *Fallout 3*, it works with the game's focus on a less rigid ethical character system (there are less clear cut "good" and "evil" characters and an overall more ambiguous moral game play). Furthermore, the game allows you to craft closer relationships with possible companion characters that come into play later on.

In *Skyrim*, you can choose the gender and fantasy race of your character (i.e., Wood Elf, Nord, Redguard, Argonian, etc.). Some of these races actually correlate to modern racial constructs: for example, if you play as a Nord, you will personify a White Nordic character, which corresponds with the racial background of the people of *Skyrim*, whereas if you choose to play as a Redguard, you will look racially Black with an interesting racial back-story. In fact, the game has a strong theme related to race, and while you can also play as a Khajit (a beast race of cats) or an Argonian (a beast race of reptiles), as well as elves, playing as a character other than a Nord will often be met with hostility by some Nord characters, as the game is set against the backdrop of a xenophobic rebellion against an empire that has seemingly sided with dark elves in order to reach a treaty. Given its complexity, a discussion of race in *Skyrim* would be its own essay. However, reflecting on themes of ethnocentrism, racism, and xenophobia in the context of a fantasy world in turmoil over attacking dragons and rebellions in and of itself offered a fascinating reflection, and only furthered my engagement within this complex open-world. In a similar vein as *Fallout 3* and *New Vegas*, you could create equally skilled characters regardless of sex (and subsequent in-game gender expression), though there were some variations by race<sup>8</sup>.

The narrative entry points of all three games, overall, offer an open world, full of varying forms of conflict, and morality, which aid in aligning the player to the game. *Fallout 3*, in particular, draws the player into the narrative by aligning the character with his or her family and friends within the backdrop of the struggle in the post-apocalyptic world. *Skyrim*, in particular,

draws you into the narrative through a dragon attack and an ideological rebellion, which can be compelling in its moral complexity. In this sense, all three games successfully introduce playing as the gender and race of your choice in the opening sequence. However, nuances in the ways encounters are experienced by the sex you have chosen or the narrative choices of developers create interesting fodder for determining individual authenticity in the space.

### **Gendered Experience in an Open World Game: Sex, Love and Combat**

*Fallout 3* and its sequel, *Fallout New Vegas*, offer interesting experiences that vary by gender. In *Fallout 3*, for example, your choices do come with corresponding experiences related to the gender of the character you created. For instance, choosing to play as a female will get you called “Bitch!” by raiders in combat, which is realistic to me as a woman playing a game about a harsh post-apocalyptic world. However, glitches often had the unfortunate effect of reminding you that you were playing in an intended male narrative. For example, game glitches would occasionally have your character referred to as a man (or referred to as “he”) and one of my ending sequence animations featured a male version of my character.

Three early relationships during *Fallout 3*’s game narrative help to influence the kind of character you eventually create: your father, a loving yet mysterious scientist whose disappearance sets off your escape from the vault; Butch, a male bully with whom your initial interactions help you understand the consequences of moral in-game choices; and your female “best friend” Amata, with whom there appears to be a bond bordering on something more (though this never materializes, especially if you play as woman). However, while Butch serves as a constant potential physical threat in the vault, and Amata has to be rescued from harassment by him and his friends, you don’t really

have the chance to engage in meaningful romantic relationships with the characters that define your early life. Moreover, while a case can be made for male bullying of women, particularly through sexual harassment, I often didn't find the kind of physical intimidation and rivalry Butch provided relatable to a female experience. Furthermore, sex seems to almost have no role in the game (which is a bit farfetched in a post-apocalyptic world in a rated mature game, especially one so otherwise strongly tied with *A Boy and His Dog*<sup>9</sup>). The developers seem to have chosen to drop sex mostly from the narrative (possibly to alleviate complication involved in developing dual-gender play, or as a deliberate attempt to avoid controversial subject matter), though very early on in the first town you visit, you meet a female prostitute named Nova, who you can choose to have paid sex with, whether you play as female or male.

Interestingly, the developers do allow you the option of taking on a unique perk called "Black Widow" if you play as a female character in *Fallout 3* or *New Vegas*, which allows you to do additional damage to male opponents in combat and opens unique dialogue choices with some key male NPCs (while it's optional to choose any perk, this perk's strong leverage in game play, and its early availability in the game almost makes it a required perk to play with). While male characters have the option of a "Lady Killer" perk (which is roughly the same as "Black Widow" except allows these advantages over non-playable female characters), there are fewer female foes one encounters in combat in the game, and less key female NPCs to manipulate. "Black Widow/Lady Killer" is the only perk that has strikingly different effects depending on the gender you play as. For example, in both *Fallout 3* and *New Vegas*, the "Black Widow" perk can be used as a means of manipulating male NPCs in important or main story quests and consequently ending those quests without as much complication. In *Fallout 3*, for example, one of the first towns you visit is Megaton, which has the possibility of being your home base. You are offered the challenging "Power of the Atom" quest, where you can either disarm the bomb that has never detonated in the center of the

town, as requested by the town sheriff, or you can blow it up, as requested by a mysterious man named Burke (on behalf of, you eventually will learn, an evil character). If you choose to detonate the bomb, it will result in a huge karma hit, the loss of key NPCs, and an almost inevitable evil moral game experience. If you choose not to detonate the bomb, you can still play as good or evil, but you can retain the ability to have Megaton be your home base. However, with the “Black Widow” perk, you can convince Burke not to be concerned with the bomb, which substantially alleviates quest hassles, including killing Burke or dealing with pesky hit men who constantly attempt to kill you (if you refuse detonating the bomb), having Burke involved in killing the sheriff (if you report Burke), as well as several other complex options that have a strong impact on the rest of your game play.

The “Black Widow” perk serves an even greater purpose in *Fallout New Vegas*, where you have the option of seducing Benny, a main character you are pursuing throughout your main quest, in an attempt to find the crucial platinum chip, and discover why you were left for dead by him at the beginning of the game. Ultimately, many of the choices in obtaining the chip from Benny involve additional hassle or additional time, like having the entire casino he is affiliated with turn hostile against you (resulting in a standoff with dozens of armed men, and the loss of several potential side quests), or having to pursue him further in the wasteland. However, the “Black Widow” perk gives you the ability to not only seduce Benny in his private quarters, but quietly remove him from the equation, saving you much time and hassle on a main story quest, and also giving you the option of obtaining some of key valuables, including the chip. Depending on how you play the game, it can also significantly speed up the completion of the main storyline.

While *Fallout 3* mostly avoids experiences that involve sex or love (beyond a few peripheral references), *Fallout New Vegas* offers interesting narrative around sexuality and relationships<sup>10</sup>. *New Vegas* offers you the opportunity to meet an array of NPC companions, who all have their own set of perks,

skills and even side quests (if you pursue them). While there isn't enough room to talk about all of the characters, their corresponding abilities and storylines at length, Veronica, Cass and Boone are three potential companions with whom you can have incredibly interesting interactions. Veronica is a member of the Brotherhood of Steel<sup>11</sup>, who is not completely sold on their isolationist, xenophobic and technology-worshipping ways. In some sense, her disillusionment may have started as a result of her sexuality: she had a romantic relationship with another female Brotherhood member (who appears in a later DLC<sup>12</sup>), which was discouraged and subsequently severed, due to the isolated Brotherhood's insistence on procreation. Her lover left the Brotherhood due to their narrow-minded ways, though Veronica's relationship becomes personal (at least for me) when you meet her former lover in a later DLC. Cass is a brass and sassy former-caravan owner and driver, who can be found in a NCR<sup>13</sup> bar, drinking incessantly. If she becomes a companion, she will openly express distaste for the misogynistic nature of Caesar's legion, a band of mostly evil slavers who attempt to take over the Mojave wasteland. Cass gave my character comfort during a difficult quest: Caesar's Legion is downright hostile to women, using them solely for sex slavery, yet, as a female character, I am the only woman to freely walk in Legion territory due to Caesar's need for my potential assistance. Legion soldiers make sure that I am aware I am a woman they would freely and violently have their way with if not for Caesar's orders, and Cass' companionship and witty commentary actually served as solace as she accompanied me through an often difficult path in meeting Caesar. Finally, Boone is a hardened yet sad former NCR military sharp-shooter, who lost his wife to Caesar's Legion and a complex tragedy he is not willing to initially reveal. You can spend a significant amount of time interacting with Boone, eventually learning about his wife and healing his past wounds related to her, and his actions during the war, but, once again, companions are limited to combat-based companionship, even while divulging their deepest secrets.

Each of the NPCs offer you a glimpse into the complexity of relationships in the post-apocalyptic world, even taking you on incredibly intimate quests or storylines, but this level of familiarity is shut down just as quickly as it's introduced, which is a bit disheartening. For the most part, once their key storyline or quest is over, dialogue is limited, though they can continue to fight by your side. Veronica's story openly discusses an intimate homosexual relationship, though exploring one yourself with her seems off-limits, even playing as a woman. Of particular frustration was the inability to talk to her lover about her in a later DLC, even though I had developed close relationships with both of them as companions. Cass' witty assurance and banter about handling her men, and her consoling presence during my harrowing journey amongst slavers and rapists, made her seem like a potential best friend. Furthermore, I appreciated her dialogue, which echoed my resistance and provided depth to the female experience in the wasteland, though beyond being a fighting companion who occasionally asks for whiskey, she doesn't pursue a deeper friendship. And, even though you spend a significant amount of time unraveling and healing Boone, who has been widowed for quite a while, you are not offered the ability to pursue anything more with him, whether it be a possible romance, or a very close friendship.

In juxtaposition, however, you can have sexual exploits out of gained admiration with women who admire and are grateful for your assistance, but with whom you otherwise share no level of close companionship, like the kind you fostered with those that fought by your side and revealed their lives to you. *Fallout New Vegas* features two possible NPCs that you can have sex with after going on mini-quests for items they require. Red Lucy is a strong, confident character who runs an underground fighting pit called The Thorn, where people can bet on gladiator-like fights featuring men and beasts from the wasteland. After finding various beast eggs for her as part of a side-quest, she will give you the honor of being her "hunter" and offer to sleep with you out of admiration whenever you request. Sarah Weintraub, who runs Vault 21 (now being used as a less expensive hotel on the New

Vegas strip), will sleep with you if you gather enough vault jumpsuits from nearby vaults for her giftshop and pass a speech option. While both women are intriguing characters to a certain extent, you never learn much about them, nor are you allowed to develop a level of social intimacy, as with your companions.

*New Vegas* further expanded the perk options by allowing males to have the “Confirmed Bachelor” perk, which enables someone playing as male to do additional damage to same-sex opponents in combat and opens dialogue choices with the same-sex (females had a similar perk called “Cherchez La Femme”). While it had the potential of being just as powerful as “Black Widow,” it was limited in that it didn’t offer the same interactions with key male NPCs (though it did open up newer options with more extraneous NPCs<sup>14</sup>). Furthermore, while there are many more prostitutes in *New Vegas* than in *Fallout 3* (including an entire hotel devoted to the practice), paid sex is still primarily reserved with women. In the hotel, you are only offered the option to have sex with two female prostitutes, regardless of gender, despite the variety of male and female homosexual and heterosexual prostitutes. One extraneous, optional side-quest called “Wang Tang Atomic Tango” allows the player to recruit a sex-bot, a female ghoul (who dresses like a dominatrix), and a “smooth talker” male prostitute. However, only one of the men you can potentially recruit will have sex with the player, regardless of gender.

Consequently, sexuality is used in both *Fallout 3* and *New Vegas* as a means of manipulating men, if and only if, you play as a woman, while unpaid sex for pleasure without manipulation is reserved only with women. *Fallout New Vegas* begins to open up avenues that explore sexuality, with the addition homosexual characters, and the potential for male homosexual interaction, though limited. As a heterosexual woman, having sex with a woman as a woman within the fantasy space doesn’t turn me off or cause me to be uncomfortable, but it does remind me that I am operating in the fantasy of a man. While a case can also be made for operating in the fantasy of a

homosexual or bisexual woman, the use of femme characters (with essentially interchangeable sexuality) reinforces a male perspective. As Ciasullo points out in her analysis of lesbian bodies in popular media, the popularity of the femme lesbian (and the consequential absence of the “butch” or otherwise not femme lesbian) is partly due to her ability to be “de-lesbianized” (Ciasullo, 2001). In other words, the women you sleep with in *Fallout* can be lesbian or straight, but ultimately will be pleasing to male attraction, as well as attainable and consumable by men.

*Skyrim* on the other hand works in many ways as a continuation on the theme of gender and sexuality in role-playing, even though it branches from another game series. *Skyrim* allows you to play as the gender and race of your choice, resulting in equally skilled characters regardless of race or gender (for the most part). Additionally, there are several more possible companions you can interact with, as well as a dizzying amount of other NPCs involved in a dizzying amount of quests, which I don’t have time to discuss at length here. However, the developers make sure to include a wide array of NPCs that cover all possible gender and race combinations, and female NPCs are prominently featured as strong, capable and equally skilled at taking on any job a man could do, including being a blacksmith or “housecarl” (*Skyrim*’s word for bodyguard). One of the earliest potential companions afforded through gameplay is a tough, capable female Nord named Uthgerd the Unbroken, who appears in a tavern in Whiterun, the first major city you venture to in the game. If you speak to her, she will challenge you to a fistfight, and if you win, she will offer to fight at your side through the game. What I found particularly fascinating was her fearless nature and her butch demeanor. Despite her disposition, a male or female can marry her.

While your companions don’t have significant back-stories or side-quests, as they do in the *Fallout* games, you do have the option of marrying your companions, who can later continue to fight by your side or tend the household. This option is extended to you by wearing an “Amulet of Mara” and having

people recognize it and proposition you. Despite whom you eventually marry, most interactions with your spouse will be the same. For the most part, *Skyrim* attempts to give the player a fair and mostly authentic playing experience whether you are playing as male or female, despite your sexuality. There appear to be both heterosexual and homosexual options for marriage and a variety of capable choices. Since there isn't a significant back-story associated with potential spouses, I didn't feel a strong sense of being shafted by not being able to choose someone I came to grow closer to through their story. However, it should be noted that marriage serves more of an economical than intimate purpose in *Skyrim*: while your spouse will open a store and generate revenue, you never get the option to share the marriage bed.

Inauthenticity was mostly a problem when it came to the race you played, as one of the main storylines involves fighting for or against a xenophobic Nordic cause, though one could make the case that fighting against this cause could resonate with one playing as a different race (this was the case for me). However, the presence of this plot device, along with popular representations of the game, brought up interesting dilemmas related to being able to choose your own character. In particular, I often wondered whether my experience was authentic when I confronted popular imagery and representations around my game, which didn't include my in-game experience.

### **Popular Representation of Your Character...“as if a Man”**

While each of these games isn't built upon a static character linked to the narrative (like the male hero, “Link,” in *Legend of Zelda*) or a named character that personifies the franchise (like “Sheppard,” who can be male or female, in *Mass Effect*), there appears to be external pressure to personify the character as if it defined the game. Each of the titles tried their best to hide any association with a static character: *Fallout 3* and *New Vegas*’ covers both had fully armored individuals who could

be claimed to be male or female (though I will later argue that as an entry point, the male would be assumed). *Skyrim's* cover only contained the symbol of the dragonborn (or "Dovahkiin"), which the main character is referred to throughout the game, despite the race (i.e., fantasy race associated with *Skyrim*) or gender chosen. However, a careful examination of the back covers of all three games erodes the fantasy: each of the titles features a male player in action (even though each game's default play style is first person, meaning that they didn't have to show gender at all to demonstrate game play). Further, the popular representation of *Skyrim's* dragonborn is a very pronounced Nord male character, as if reinforcing the default option of playing as a Nord. This version of the Dovahkin is present in all forms of media used to promote the game, including popular game magazines, fan websites, and a promotional memorabilia. Since you are often spoken to and treated as if you are a Nord throughout the game anyway, it serves to erode the authenticity of your experience if you played as another race. And, while gender doesn't seem to matter either way in game play, the use of the male Nord in marketing and imagery erodes the authenticity of choosing to play as female. More importantly, it limits the entry point into the game for many players that wouldn't otherwise see themselves enjoying this kind of storyline, even though the ability to customize your experience would actually make it enjoyable to a wider audience.



Figure 1: Fallout 3 images. Left: Front and back cover of the Fallout 3 game. Photo Credit: Bethesda Softworks. Right: close-up of your main character, as a male, reinforcing associations with *A Boy and His Dog*. Photo Credit: Bethesda Softworks, <http://fallout.bethsoft.com/>



Figure 2: Left: Front and back cover of *Fallout New Vegas*. Right: Close-up of a back cover photo of your character, as a man, in action. Just as with *Fallout 3*, the use of a fully-armored and gender ambiguous character on the front cover allows one to maintain the illusion of playing as the gender of your choice, while the use of action pictures of your character as a male on the back cover can assist in eroding that illusion. Photo Credit: Bethesda Softworks.



Figure 3: Front and Back cover of the Skyrim game. Note that the front cover doesn't reinforce a static character. Photo Credit: Bethesda Softworks.





Figure 4: Popular representation of the Dragonborn (“Dovahkiin”). Left: image associated with the game, which was promoted in *Game Informer*, a popular gaming magazine. Photo Credit: *Game Informer*. Center: The cover of a game magazine promoted in Europe. Photo Credit: *Bethesda Blog*, <http://www.bethblog.com/>. Right: Human-scale promotional statue of the dragonborn: dozens were shipped as collectables and featured in many game retail stores. Photo Credit: *Bethesda Blog*, <http://www.bethblog.com/>.

## The Evolution of Choosing Your Gender

In recent years, it appears that developers and game companies are becoming progressively more sensitive to gamers’ desires to develop their own unique characters, with gender and race being increasingly offered as characteristics that can be individualized. For example, two other major RPG titles have allowed you the ability to choose whether you want to play as male or female: *Mass Effect 1, 2 and 3* and *Fable 2 and 3*. Interestingly enough, the shift for most major titles seems to have occurred around 2007-2008. The original *Fable* game, released in 2004, would only allow you to play as male, though this changed for *Fable 2*, which allowed one to play as a male or female character, and was released in 2008. *Mass Effect 1* was released in late 2007, and featured the ability to play as the male or female captain Sheppard; the later titles of *Mass Effect 2 and 3*

were released in 2010 and 2012 respectively, and had expanded options for sexuality in relation to the gender chosen. Similarly, *Fallout 3* was released in 2008, *Fallout NV* in 2010, and *Skyrim* in late-2011.

I chose to limit this narrative to the *Fallout* series and *Skyrim* because, unlike *Mass Effect*, they allow you to fully customize your character down to the name, in addition to race and gender. *Mass Effect* primarily enforced playing as “Captain Sheppard,” a male default character who could be customized to be female. While in the first game, this seemed tacked on, later titles allowed for enhanced experiences playing with the gender of your choice. Furthermore, *Mass Effect* mirrors similar progressions in playing as the gender or sexuality of your choice by increasing the amount of characters you could be intimate with: in the original *Mass Effect*, there were only three characters which you could be intimate with, which included a male NPC if you were playing as a woman, a female NPC if you were playing as a man, and a female alien NPC which either could be intimate with, reinforcing the heterosexual male experience. Later titles, particularly *Mass Effect 3*, created more variation. *Fable 2*, on the other hand, attempted early on to create a female experience that was equal to that of a man, allowing female characters to get as large and bulky as male characters as they grew stronger. While there was a lot of controversy around allowing females to play with what would come to look like a masculine-defined female body, I felt more personally disconnected from the types of sexual interactions allowed in the game: the men with whom you could marry often came across as rather effeminate in their demeanor and interaction, which wasn’t appealing to me as a heterosexual woman. In other words, in an attempt to create equality, the developers (perhaps mistakenly) allowed you to play essentially as the female version of a man, complete with an eventually masculine-looking body, and feminine-acting male lovers. However, the use of more inclusive gender and sexuality options in recent years, particularly in 2011 and 2012 is encouraging, though the marketing around these games can be a barrier to entry points for gamers and non-gamers alike.

## Entry Points to the Narrative Game World

The industry and popular media continue to assume that women are not playing games as much as men are, and it is implied that there are barriers to this participation that include the ways characters are portrayed, or the kinds of content in games - in this sense, entry points are crucial. If we are starting to see more games that allow players to craft a dialogue that relates to them and the way they want to experience gender and race in relation to that particular game world and quest line, I find it also crucial for individuals to know what those games are about. Entry points are the points at which potential players become familiar with the game: but if the marketing and the memorabilia are not consistent with the game possibilities, then there is a potential population being missed.

Recently, I was explaining the experiences I had in *Skyrim* to other gamers and non-gamers alike: what was striking was that there were just as many hardcore male and female gamers as non-gamers that were initially uninterested in playing *Skyrim*. Its use of the male Nord, while appealing to some gamers, was completely alienating to others, particularly many black and Latino male gamers, in addition to female gamers. One lifelong Latino male gamer confided in me that he loved Bethesda titles, but couldn't get into that "bow and arrow and dragon-related mythological playing," which, to me, speaks to a larger cultural disconnect. However, many of us were Bethesda supporters, having played *Fallout 3* and *New Vegas*, which ultimately led us to experiment with the game, and others eventually followed once they became aware of the array of options. Nevertheless, the entry point was limiting in the sense that a potential population would have been missed, especially for non-gamers, who I often speak with related to my own research.

## The Unique Experience of Female Gamers

As females occupying the gaming spaces, we are often thrilled to have new choices in interaction so much so that we may miss the other nuance of our experiences within the context of playing as a woman. Part of what drew me to video games was my rejection of static notions of female experience and expression: I liked power and violence in how it allowed me to define myself outside of traditional female roles. One of my earliest movie icons was Ripley from *Aliens*, who was, in many ways, the 80s personification of Rosie the Riveter. Growing up with feminist parents probably furthered my association with Ripley who was as capable as a man, but was also in touch with her femininity as a mother figure and a love interest. She could be strong and powerful, sexy and brave, dependent and dependable: she could save all of the men and children and still be the sexual interest of a respected, strong and capable man.

However, we didn't get to play as Ripley – we got to play as a man as we imagined being her. Our games didn't pass the Bechdel test<sup>15</sup>; in fact, they didn't come close. As women's presence in gaming spaces is increasing, video game companies are beginning to allow for a variety of gendered experiences, at least as long as they relate to a narrative that often starts around a man. However, the move toward increased sexual expression and equal capability despite gender, suggests that the gendered nature of the narrative is breaking down. The last barrier, it appears, is increasing the access to that narrative and that expression: the longer that games continued to be marketed as boy's spaces, the less likely those that don't see themselves inhabiting those spaces will take part in that narrative. While I love the *Skyrim* male Nord, I also love my female wood elf, who bravely fought against a xenophobic cause, saved *Skyrim* from dragons and dark elves, and married a male mage who cooks her a home cooked meal once a day. I want her story on the cover of Game Informer too.

## Endnotes

(1) RPG – Role Playing Game. RPGs are typically defined by having open-ended, or even exploratory worlds or quests. In particular, the ability to craft your experience through your actions and choices (i.e., role play) is central.

(2) Bethesda Softworks is a game development and publishing company.

(3) Since the creation of *Fallout New Vegas*, which is in many ways a sequel to *Fallout 3*, *Fallout 3* actually stands out as if it is a first game in a new series, though it does draw from much of *Fallout 1* and *Fallout 2*'s original story and concept. However, *Fallout 3* and *New Vegas* were developed and published by Bethesda Softworks, respectively, using new game mechanics, a new interface, and more complex interactive possibilities, setting it apart in many ways from the original games, which were developed by Interplay Entertainment Corporation, a different development and publishing company.

(4) *A Boy and His Dog* is a 1974 film based on short, science fiction stories by Harlan Ellison. It features a wayward boy and an intelligent, telepathic dog, who attempt to survive in an alternate post-apocalyptic, futuristic world that branched off from our current world by the unsuccessful assassination of John F. Kennedy. Many parts of the *Fallout 3* narrative (as well as the narrative of the original series) are strongly associated with this movie.

(5) You are born in a vault used as a sustainable fallout shelter in case of nuclear holocaust, which your predecessors were able to escape to and survive in before the bombs dropped over a hundred years before.

(6) S.P.E.C.I.A.L. is a complex attribute system where you determine your underlying physical, mental, learned- and luck-based attributes that correspond with your skills, which range from combat based skills (like how good you are with weapon types), to medicine, speech and sneaking skills.

(7) NPC - non-playable characters who usually have interesting clues, stories or side quests

(8) Some races in *Skyrim* did have underlying attributes that set them apart but not overwhelmingly against the attributes of another race.

(9) The main character in *A Boy and His Dog* is constantly on the lookout for females to have sex with (or even sexually assault).

(10) Of course, most of this depends on how you play, as with any other open world RPG. If you happen to meet and choose certain companions, as well as engage in extended dialogue choices with them, you are more likely to foster stronger bonds of intimacy. Each of the following characters were not essential to game play, but had fairly prominent roles with key in-game factions, and could strongly assist in determining more advantageous outcomes in the game.

(11) The Brotherhood of Steel is a faction that has appeared since the original series (*Fallout 1 & 2*). Though they consist of several regional groups (with different ideologies), they tend to focus on preserving ancient technology, as well as creating advanced technology. They have sometimes been shown to do this while helping people in the wasteland, and sometimes portrayed as doing so at their expense. In *Fallout New Vegas*, the Mojave faction of the Brotherhood has isolated itself from the outside world, though they send scouts to occasionally spy on what's going on.

(12) DLC – Downloadable Content. Each of these games has downloadable content, which adds onto the original games' stories with new quests, side quests and characters.

(13) NCR – New California Republic. They are a federation which tries to spread democracy, liberty and many of the “old” American values. They also have a military and specialized rangers.

(14) One possible companion is Arcade Gannon, a member of the Followers of the Apocalypse (a group dedicated to bringing free knowledge, technology and assistance to the people of the wasteland). He is presented as medically knowledgeable, incredibly intelligent, yet not the strongest in combat. It is also implied he is homosexual, though, while he can be recruited by male players with the “Confirmed Bachelor” perk (and comments to females that he would not be interested in them), he does not present a narrative around his sexuality.

(15) The Bechdel Test was popularized by the famous, long-standing comic strip, *Dykes to Watch out for*, by Alison Bechdel. It is a popular

test that measures a film's gender bias by determining if it, at minimum, has (1) at least two women in it, (2) who talk to each other, and (3) about something other than a man (this man doesn't have to be a romantic interest). Surprisingly, many films even to this day do not pass the test, and *Aliens* was originally cited as one of the few that had at the time the strip came out in the 1980s. Similarly, many games titles, even to this day, do not often feature more than one woman, if a woman is featured at all, especially one that interacts with another.

## References

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